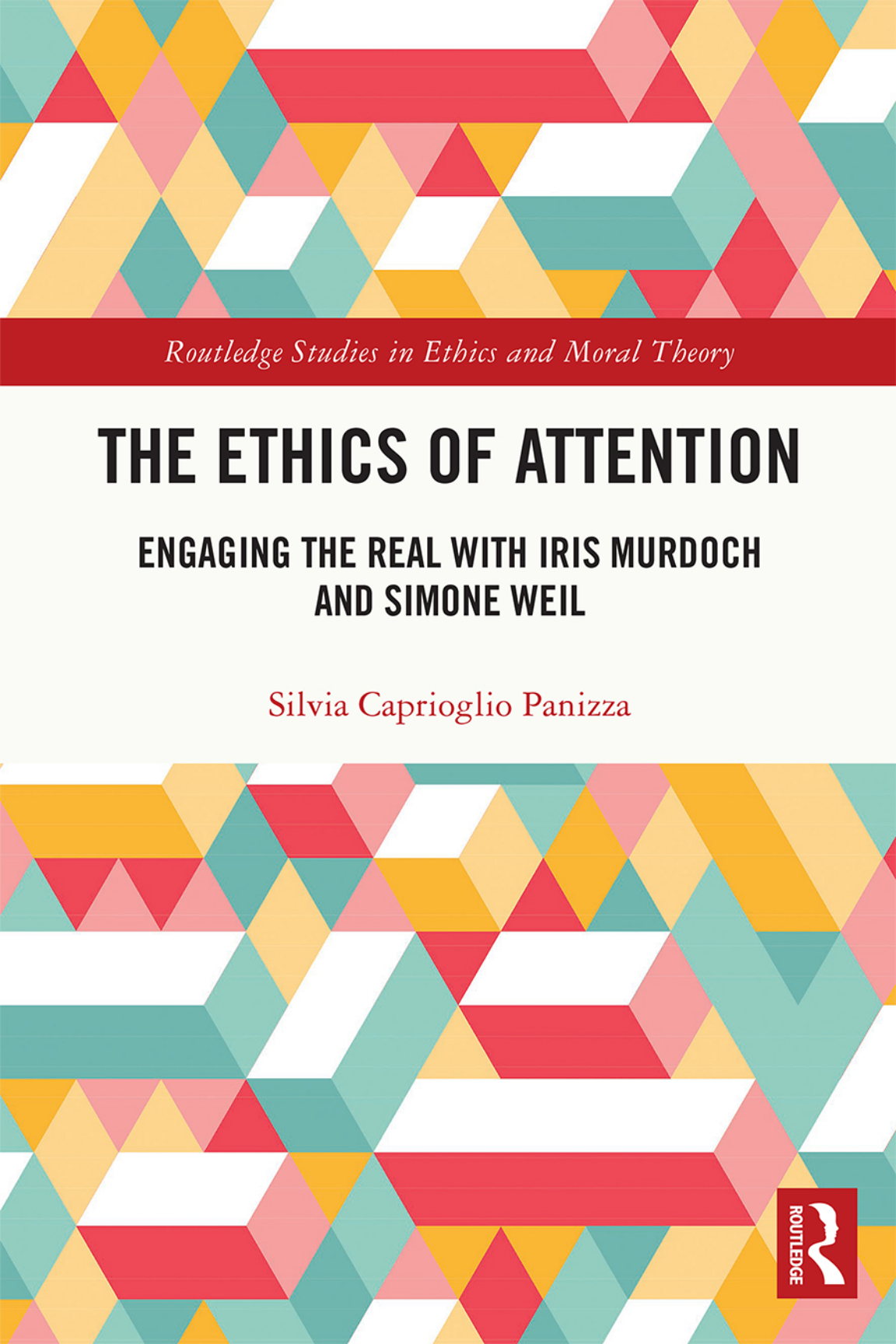
Routledge Studies in Ethics and Moral Theory
THE ETHICS OF ATTENTION
ENGAGING THE REAL WITH IRIS MURDOCH AND SIMONE WEIL
Silvia Caprioglio Panizza
ROUTLEDGE

The Ethics of Attention

This book draws on Iris Murdoch's philosophy to explore questions related to the importance of attention in ethics. In doing so, it also engages with Murdoch's ideas about the existence of a moral reality, the importance of love, and the necessity but also the difficulty, for most of us, of fighting against our natural self-centred tendencies.

Why is attention important to morality? This book argues that many moral failures and moral achievements can be explained by attention. Not only our actions and choices, but the possibilities we choose among, and even the meaning of what we perceive, are to a large extent determined by *whether* we pay attention, and *what* we attend do. In this way, the book argues that attention is fundamental, though often overlooked, in morality. While the book's discussion of attention revolves primarily around Murdoch's thought, it also engages significantly with Simone Weil, who introduced the concept of attention in a spiritual context. The book also engages with contemporary debates concerning moral perception and motivation, empirical psychology, animal ethics, and Buddhist philosophy.

The Ethics of Attention will be of interest to researchers and advanced students working on Iris Murdoch, Simone Weil, ethics and moral psychology, and the philosophy of attention.

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The Ethics of Attention

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Human kind cannot bear very much reality.
(T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', *Four Quartets***)**

The poet produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real. It is the same with the act of love. To know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do—that is enough, the rest follows of itself.
(Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace***, 119)**

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There is an unfortunate irony about this book, which is that it stole the attention from those who deserve it during the final months of writing it. I can only apologise to them, and hope that the reflections in these pages will allow me to return the stolen attention more plentifully than I would have been able to do without.

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Abbreviations

Works by Iris Murdoch

AD	Against Dryness
AIN	Art is the Imitation of Nature
DPR	The Darkness of Practical Reason
F&S	The Fire and The Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists
IP	The Idea of Perfection
KV	Knowing the Void
MGM	*Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*
NP	Nostalgia for the Particular
OGG	On 'God' and 'Good'
SBR	The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited
S&G	The Sublime and the Good
SGC	The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts
T&L	Thinking and Language
TSE	T. S. Eliot as a Moralist
VCM	Vision and Choice in Morality

Works by Simone Weil

APP	*On the Abolition of All Political Parties*
GG	*Gravity and Grace*
HP	Human Personality
IPF	*The Iliad or the Poem of Force*
LN	The Love of Our Neighbour
LP	*Lectures on Philosophy*
OL	*Oppression and Liberty*
LOW	Love of the Order of the World
RSS	Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God
SA	Spiritual Autobiography
SN	*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God*
WG	*Waiting for God*

Introduction

When 28-year-old Daisy, who had been sleeping rough for 18 months in London, met journalist Victoria Derbyshire, she told her something that one may find surprising. The worst thing about rough sleeping, in her view, was not the cold nights, or the discomfort of a makeshift bed. Rather, 'the worst thing about rough sleeping is not being seen' (BBC 2020). A sentiment echoed by many. Mark Horvath, founder of the 'Invisible People' project, was inspired in his work by a homeless man living in Los Angeles. He said:

> For years, the man assumed he was invisible because no one would look at him. That is until a boy handed him a pamphlet one day and the man responded, 'What! You can see me? How can you see me? I'm invisible!'.
>
> (Mentock n.d.)[1]

There can be harm in not seeing. This is, I think, a difficult thought to hold. We can have an impact on others simply by directing, or failing to direct, our gaze. The people who are harmed by not being seen are, of course, part of our visual field for at least a short period of time. Then two sets of possibilities become available to us: to look away immediately or to look at them as we would somebody else; and to look at them in an unresponsive and unengaged way, as objects—or to pay attention to them.[2]

Being attended to can be transformative, as the man in Los Angeles testifies. Attention is a way, perhaps the first way, of acknowledging another's existence. Everything follows from that. And yet, it is something we can fail to do so much of the time. In fact, attention is not easy at all.

In the case of homeless people, there are many reasons for avoiding attention. We may feel guilt: at living in a society that enables that predicament; at our comfortable lives; at the fact that we are not helping. We may feel uncomfortable, for their lives look very different from ours. We may be afraid of such difference. And so on. These emotions arise when those individuals enter our landscape. Then, looking away can be an active rejection of acknowledgment.

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At times not attending can be less like a refusal, and more like a habit developed, perhaps to avoid those forms of discomfort in the first place. When one consumes a meal containing animals and their products, for instance, very seldom is attention directed at the animals themselves. They are, as Carol Adams (1990) memorably put it, the great 'absent referent'. Lack of attention to the animals does not have the consequence of making animals feel unreal, as in the case above, because the animals are no longer there. (But we could still worry about lack of acknowledgment, which can also apply to the dead.) What is clearer is that lack of attention, here, makes it easier to perform certain actions, buying and consuming products which, if we attended to the animals and the production process, we may feel a moral resistance towards.[3]

Yet we know what happens to animals. We know the meat on the table, the jacket in the shop, came from once living, breathing animals. But attention is not just knowledge. It is participating in what we are seeing or thinking about, even if we are not actors on the scene. Knowledge can be abstract, attention is concrete. Iris Murdoch contrasts attention with 'looking' (IP 329). Both knowing and looking may be detached, attention is engaged. Knowing and looking may be superficial, attention is imaginative. Looking (but not knowing) may be distorting, attention is truth-directed. Attention is directed at reality and, specifically, at an individual reality: not 'people', not 'animals', not 'nature', but *this* person, *this* animal, *this* blade of grass.[4]

We begin to see that attention is far from inconsequential. It can effect significant changes in others, in our actions, as well as in ourselves. But attention does not only matter in terms of its consequences. It also matters in itself. In attention, we join reality, we become more truthful, more present—and that has far reaching, although sometimes imperceptible, effects on our consciousness, our character, our priorities … as well as our present and future actions.

To summarise, the exercise of attention (or its failure) has two main, interconnected, manifestations: one is that there are things that we may wish to ignore, but that in order to be morally responsible we ought not to ignore; the other is that, while some things are within our field of vision, we may not fully engage with them, we may 'look' without 'seeing', and ignore certain aspects, block our sympathy, avoid exercising the imagination, and so on. Attention involves not just 'knowledge', but also, with Stanley Cavell (1979), 'acknowledgment'.

This book

In this book I propose an 'ethics of attention': a meta ethical and normative view that takes attention to be central. My claim in this book is that attention is fundamental to morality. It returns the experience of a reality from which distraction, defenses, or projection separate us. That, in itself, makes us better, more open and less self-concerned. Every time, often imperceptibly, attention shapes us and our world. It constitutes the

background upon which deliberation, choice, and action occur. At its most successful, attention renders deliberation and choice unnecessary, because the experience of the reality that attention reveals already contains within itself both motivation and direction. Attention can do all of this, yet it is often overlooked when moral questions are discussed, or moral situations confronted. The idea, unfortunately, is not mine. It comes from Irish Murdoch, on whom I will be mainly drawing, who in turn took it from Simone Weil, who will also figure prominently in these pages, but as a 'secondary character'.

Here is a brief summary of the book as a whole. Chapter 1 sets out the reasons for considering attention morally at all, and then discusses the two 'axes' upon which attention operates morally: the presence or absence of attention, and the objects of attention. Chapters 2 and 3 engage with the role of the self in attention. If attention is truth-seeking, it needs to remove our own projections and distortions. That is 'unselfing'. In these chapters, I consider respectively a 'tame' or moderate 'unselfing', that is, the removal of self-concern, and a 'radical' unselfing, that is, the removal of any idea of substantial and fixed self. Either way, the idea that attending needs to be directed to reality and away from the self creates difficulties for self-knowledge, which I try to resolve in Chapter 4. The last two chapters, Chapters 5 and 6, concern the consequences of attention for moral perception, motivation, and action. There, I claim that attention is necessary for moral perception, and can be sufficient for motivation and action based on such perception.

Weil, Murdoch, and me

Although they did not choose it, this book puts together the thoughts of Weil and Murdoch with some of my own reflections. In order of prominence: Murdoch, Weil, and my attempt to tease out and justify ideas that I find important. This interaction is perhaps an obvious fact of any book that aims both at exegesis and at defending an idea. But it raises the questions: where does Weil end and Murdoch begin? And: Where do Weil and Murdoch, and especially Murdoch, end, and I begin?

The aim of the book is to *develop* Murdoch's ideas about attention. That means, on the one hand, that Simone Weil's philosophy, which inspired Murdoch's idea of attention in fundamental ways, accompanies many of the reflections offered here. In some cases, Weil works as support or development of ideas about attention that are derived from Murdoch. In other cases, Murdoch departs from Weil; when that happens, it is, I hope, clearly flagged.

On the other hand, developing Murdoch's (and Weil's) ideas about attention means taking paths that they did not take. My hope is that, when that happens, the ideas offered are nonetheless *compatible* with, primarily, Murdoch's views on attention. Some of the new paths are dictated by historical context: when it is helpful, I make connections with

contemporary discussions of attention in philosophy and psychology. All in all, Murdoch offers attention as a way forward in morality, a fundamental yet neglected moral phenomenon, but she has so much more to say, that some of the potential of this suggestion remains untapped. Expanding it through connections with their origin in Weil, and through further ethical exploration, is the goal of this book.

Attention and Murdoch's philosophy

Attention is central to Murdoch's thought not only because of the fundamental role which, I argue, it plays in morality, but also because of the way it operates within Murdoch's philosophy as a whole, holding together her most distinctive ideas. Two of Murdoch's ideas which differentiate her from her contemporaries are the emphasis on the inner life, and a particular type of moral realism, which affirms the reality of the good while also allowing for the individual's contribution in perception and understanding. Attention is central to both.

Attention and the importance of the inner life go hand in hand. Attention, for Murdoch, both shapes and is determined by the individual's consciousness. Twentieth-century moral philosophy, in Murdoch's view, is fixated on will and action, and that overlooks the way in which much of what is morally relevant occurs on a level that is more inward, more elusive, and longer lasting (see Cordner 2016: 198). This kind of argument is developed, for instance, in 'Vision and Choice in Morality' and in 'The Idea of Perfection', where Murdoch insists on the ethical value of the inner life—developed, in various ways, through the quality and objects of attention—aiming to show the inadequacies of a moral philosophy that only understands morality as based on what is publicly observable. The much-discussed M&D example, which revolves around an act of attention, is at the same time primarily aimed at showing the importance of the inner life in morality, and how inner events can have moral relevance without any action occurring at all. By ignoring what happens besides and before action, the kind of ethics Murdoch attacks fails to understand not only the moral qualities of individuals, but also of the actions themselves, as long as they appear detached from the 'inner work' that shapes them. This is true, for Murdoch, not only of what is explicitly moral, but of all actions, and of concepts too.

Taking attention seriously in morality also supports the possibility of moral realism, and in turn moral realism allows us to draw a picture of morality where attention is of fundamental importance. Murdoch claims that 'goodness is connected with knowledge' (IP 330). There are two ideas which come together in this thought. On the one hand, the object of knowledge is, for Murdoch, a *moral reality*, which divides between the ideal Good and the value which is part of the world. At the same time, for Murdoch, moral reality is not known impersonally and passively, but

through the active exercise of the individual's faculties which are guided by value. She writes:

> It is perfectly obvious that goodness *is* connected with knowledge: not with impersonal quasi-scientific knowledge of the ordinary world, 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 certainly perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline.
>
> (IP 330)

Value is, Murdoch claims, both a real constituent of the world and a ubiquitous constituent of consciousness. Both claims justify, indeed require, the need for attention: attention is what discovers value in reality, and it is itself a moral faculty. The apparent tension between value being part of reality and of the structure of the mind has led to a lively discussion about Murdoch's brand of moral realism, and interpretations vary: from Antonaccio's (2000) 'reflexive realism', to the Platonic 'earthy realism' supported by Robjant (2011), through Bagnoli's (2012) constructivist reading. While I find the more robust form of realism more plausibly attributed to Murdoch, which is the reading I will support in the book, attention remains central on all of these readings. Whether value is there independently of the activity of evaluation, or whether it is something that is determined by such activity, attention enables the proper relationship to the world where value, in various ways, is encountered. It not only does so instrumentally (we need to know what is true to make good choices), but also constitutively, removing obscuring influences (mostly, arising out of self-concern) from the world we apprehend.

The difficulty of attention

I have opened with cases where attention stands out, partly due to the clear moral relevance of the situations, but also because they are cases of lack or failures of attention. That is because the moral importance of attention is easier to see when attention fails. Indeed, this whole book could have been written from the perspective of the failures of attention: what does it mean not to attend, how do we do it, and why? Failures of attention are ubiquitous, take numerous forms, and are hidden and disguised in so many ways. The reason for embarking on a study of attention in ethics is not only because it is so important, but precisely because we fail so much and so often, with consequences that can be disastrous. The world's literature is full of compelling and even heart-warming (because we're not alone) descriptions of how humans fail to attend, and as far as description and re-creation of what happens go, I cannot hope to do better or even as well here. In this book I try, instead, to argue for

the positive side of attention: to offer reasons for trying to attend more and better, to explore all that attention can do, and to bring out some ways in which we can be more attentive.

When we attend, even if nothing follows, we are breaking through solipsistic tendencies. This is the inherent value of attention. Part of its value, however, comes from its rarity: attention is difficult. The two cases I introduced above give us no trouble explaining why we find it hard to attend. Attention to suffering is hard, opening up to the possibility that we are doing something wrong is hard, accepting that our world includes some fundamental harm is hard. But there is something else about attention that is more difficult to grasp: reality is difficult for us to contemplate. Not just suffering, not just this or that reality: reality itself.

I have opened this book with T. S. Eliot telling us that we cannot bear too much reality. I think Iris Murdoch's philosophical work is, in a significant way, a moral response to this statement. 'We are not used to looking at the real world at all', she writes, so anything that encourages or indeed forces us to do so (in her example, great art) startles us—but can also delight us (OGG 35 2). Try it: look at something ordinary with attention. After some time, the object will transform—it will become less familiar, more interesting, even awe-inspiring, just because it exists.

This is part of what Cora Diamond (2008) has called 'the difficulty of reality'. The difficulty is 'the mind's not being able to encompass something which it encounters' (44). Diamond's main examples are not insignificant: the fact of death, animal suffering, beauty. But anything can present such difficulty. Habit pushes things into the realm of the unproblematic. That's sometimes necessary. But it does not come without a cost. According to Murdoch, the tendency to run away from reality is constitutive of the human mind. On the one hand, we find it easier to see things as we would like them to be. On the other, to 'really see' reality is an 'endless task' (IP 317), because there is always more to see and understand, the distance between us and reality can be bridged but imperfectly. Murdoch's inspiration, time and again, is Plato. The myth of the cave: it takes work and effort to see things as they are, and the vision may not be comfortable. That is why attention is crucial: to counteract or prevent illusion. So what else can we do, but to at least try to attend more, if we don't want to miss our own lives, and miss the world?

The sense of attention to reality as a demand and the resistance we experience go hand in hand. Explaining it is difficult. There are psychological reasons that can be more superficial or deeper. We know that we feel resistance because reality is not as we want it to be. This is part of Murdoch's thought, and her emphasis on removing the ego in attention. But this resistance is not a simple instance of selfishness, or a childish refusal to accept the facts. Attending means giving yourself over to the unknown; what you just cannot control; what marks your limits; it means accepting—taking

in—a reality that lacks order, that is mutable, and finite, including you (the great lesson of Buddhism).

The thoughts about the distance of reality, and their Platonic influence, come to Murdoch from Simone Weil. Indeed, why reality itself is hard to contemplate, and why it is good to try, are fundamental questions that may be more suitably addressed by a mystic. Simone Weil was one. For her, the difficulty of attending comes from an ontological premise, which comes with a normative requirement: remove your will to let reality emerge. Iris Murdoch was not (in any ordinary sense) a mystic. Yet, her moral reflections rest on foundations that are metaphysical and require not so much argument, but a shift in vision. What Murdoch takes to be fundamental is that we are guided by a sense of something absolute—the idea of perfection, or the Platonic Idea of the Good—which we cannot justify precisely because it governs all of our conscious activities. And with that, she takes it as fundamental that 'consciousness is a form of moral activity: what we attend do, how we attend, whether we attend' (MGM 167). Good, following Plato, is closely connected with Truth. So reality, for Murdoch, is a normative concept: something that we infinitely strive towards, and never fully reach. There is no love without realism. No flourishing through blindness.

Vision and touch, body and metaphor

In most of this book I use, following Murdoch, the language of vision to talk about attention. Vision is a common metaphor which, as Murdoch explains, comes naturally to us when we talk about immediate understanding and moral perception: 'The activity and imagery of vision is at the centre of human existence, wherein we are conscious of ourselves as both inward and outward, distanced and surrounded.' But, as a metaphor, it also comes with connotations to which one may object. Murdoch is aware: 'The visual is an image of distance and non-possession' (MGM 461–2). The non-possessive element of attention is important and beneficial. Distance may simply mean refraining from distortion. But if it means contemplative detachment, then it is rarely appropriate. Often attention is involved, close, it is engaged. That is one reason why we may want to use other metaphors, beyond vision, to talk about what attention yields. But more importantly, we need to remember that, in actual experience, we do not only attend with our eyes. We attend mentally, yes. But we also attend with our ears, with our fingers, with our nose. Attention is a form of perception. It is, therefore, embodied. This aspect, not sufficiently stressed by Murdoch, is important to another philosopher of attention, Merleau-Ponty. In a recent book, Richard Kearney (2021) has challenged the primacy of

sight, and recommends touch as central to our encounter with reality. Vision can make us spectators. Touching, we are participants, more open to reciprocity and experience. Hence, as Kearney argues, we should not underestimate the role of touch in attention:

> Touch provides our most basic apprehension of things. Why? Because tactility is the ability to modulate the passion of existence—Greek pathos understood as suffering, receiving, enduring others who come to us as this or that. Passion, passivity, and patience share a common root. This is what the poet Christian Wiman calls the 'passion of pure attention, nerves, readiness.' To touch and be touched simultaneously is to be connected with others in a way that prizes us open … Which is no bad thing. Without exposure of skin (ex-peausition) there is no real experience.
>
> (41)

Touch is waiting (*attendre*), and it is vulnerability. It is attentive passion. This thought is, in fact, very Weilian, very Murdochian. Attention is *eros*. It is the desire to join the world. But it is non-possessive desire. While Murdoch emphasises apprehension over reciprocity, and distance over closeness, she does so for specific reasons: to stress that in attention we need to put our self-interest to a side, and avoid possessiveness. Vision is suited for the Platonic intellectual insight that pushes us beyond appearance to the ideal. But the ideal (the Good) is manifested in the physical world, a world which is not to be transcended but known better and more intimately. None of this, then, prevents us from considering attention bodily, and to use vision but also touch, smell, and so on, both literally and metaphorically. As Kearney writes, 'flesh is not opposed to mind—it is deep mind, intimate mind, felt mind' (47).[5]

A non-anthropocentric ethics

This book takes a non-anthropocentric perspective, as much as I am capable of it given my humanity and socio-historical context. When I talk about ethics, I do not assume that human beings are the primary objects of moral thinking and feeling. Instead, unless specifically stated, I will be talking generally about morality, taking for granted that it takes a number of different objects depending on different factors. Non-human animals figure significantly in this book, and there are specific considerations that are raised in relation to the ethics of relating to them, but that does not make this into a book in applied ethics, insofar as applied ethics is concerned with one specific field or group or problem only, separating it from morality generally. There are specificities about ethics in the case of non-human animals, such as the fact that they are the group made to suffer and die by humans more than any other; or that there are specific difficulties in thinking about, and attending to, other animals, which are partly different from

the difficulties in relating to other humans. But only partly. Much of what I will say about the ethics of attention is manifested in relation to other people as well as other animals (and sometimes other living organisms).

I think it is time to at least ditch the *assumption* that moral thinking is properly or primarily about humans. An assumption which, I believe, both Murdoch and Weil made throughout most of their work. Yet, I use their philosophy to develop a moral account along non-anthropocentric lines. This is because I think the tools they offer are among the best for moral thinking generally. One could go further, and claim—as Mick Smith (2011) does—that Murdochian philosophy can offer tools for re-thinking human dominance over nature: her notion of unselfing, the idea of giving up possession and control, and the capacity to value what is other are all themes that fit very well within an ecological ethic and, indeed, worldview. These suggestions, at the same time, are, according to Smith, unintentional, insofar as Murdoch herself was not primarily or especially concerned with either environmental or animal issues. I think that is true.[6]

Nonetheless, for its broad and adaptable nature, as well as for its ability to offer an alternative to mainstream theories that are felt by some as increasingly unsatisfying, Murdoch's ethics has been adopted not only by environmental thinkers like Smith, but also by animal ethicists, who find promise in the idea of attention to and love for other animals. In terms of philosophical approach, Aaltola (2018: 194) stresses that Murdoch's emphasis on love, vision, and particularity is a better starting point than many theories specific to animal ethics which are rationalistic and abstract. By returning us to the individual, reality, and felt experience, Murdoch's ethics makes it easier both to approach animals, and to think of ourselves as animals.

Attention, now

> Our confused conscious being is both here and elsewhere, living at different levels and in different modes of cognition. We are 'distracted' creatures, extended, layered, pulled apart.
>
> (MGM 296)

The conversations about attention that I have in this book with Murdoch and Weil aim to have a broad and general validity. At the same time attention, like everything else, moves and changes through historical periods, political influences, and cultural geographies. In the twenty-first century, particularly in the West, it is said that attention is scarcer than ever, and more politicised, and at the mercy of market interests. The scarcity refers, mainly, to the *divided attention* that is the result of an increasing number of objects that compete for our attention. Information is plentiful and, in some cases, overabundant. To cope with the multiplication of stimuli, *sustained attention* becomes

rarer and more difficult to achieve, because our more frequent switching of attention among different objects, and the shorter 'attention span' encouraged by current technology, which trains our minds towards distraction. Attention, as Tim Wu (2016) has emphatically shown, has also increasingly become a commodity: advertisement, particularly on the internet, depends on capturing attention. The 'the attention economy' has become a field of study in its own right. The market use of attention shows an awareness of some of the features of attention that will be relevant for us in this book: that attention structures our consciousness (Watzl 2017); that it is closely related to working memory (Oberauer 2019); and that attending is a way of valuing.

For some, the situation of attention scarcity feels distressing. Not only because we have too many possible objects of attention, experienced as a strain on our resources, but also because it becomes more difficult to pay attention at all. As I will present it in this book, it is not enough for attention that consciousness is captured by or 'filled' with an object. Attention contains an (often implicit) element of truth-seeking. When attention is strained, and when the objects encourage fantasy or self-indulgence rather than truthfulness, we become less likely to pay attention at all. Attention can reveal something which is there, but it often takes time, patience, and a sort of 'mental presence'. What Weil calls 'waiting'.

The connection with patience and presence can make the exploration of attention particularly timely from a political point of view. Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis (2014) have argued that the main reason why twenty-first century society is, as they believe, moving towards 'moral blindness' is the loss of the ability to be present and appreciate the particularity of individuals, partly caused by the increasing use of certain kinds of technology. (Three decades ago, Murdoch had similar complaints in relation to television, claiming that it 'impairs our power to perceive' (MGM 377)).[7]

As we shall see, attending involves both striving towards truthful vision and refraining from projections, which can mean patiently waiting for our faculties to become attuned to the object and for its multiple aspects to reveal themselves. To attend patiently and receptively to all reality like we attend to a painting: art—one of Murdoch's favourite images but also instances of goodness—can give us a useful image of the kind of attention that the various critics mentioned above may wish to restore. Art professor Jennifer Roberts (2013) calls for the recovery of precisely this sort of patient attention, which she recommends to students as essential to be able to see what is in a painting (but also in reality more generally):

> these are the kind of practices that now most need to be actively engineered by faculty, because they simply are no longer available … It is commonly assumed that vision is immediate … But what students learn in a visceral way is that in any work of art there are details and orders and relationships that take time to perceive.
>
> (Roberts 2013: n.p.)

There is a 'depth' to things, which is *there*, but also often not immediately available. A central idea of Murdoch's and Weil's, and Plato's too.

The need for recovering attention, again, is probably not specific to our time, but it may be getting more acute. Perhaps it is for these reasons the we are seeing in the West an increased interest in Buddhist practices, which through meditation teach precisely to train the attention—and aim for freedom from suffering which results from inattention and illusion. The importance of attention is indeed central to Buddhist philosophy:

> the Buddha gave prime importance to the ability to frame the issue of suffering in the proper way. He called this ability *yoniso manasikara*—appropriate attention—and taught that no other inner quality was more helpful for untangling suffering and gaining release.
>
> (Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2006: n.p.)

It is not surprising, then, that Murdoch flirted with Buddhism, and that her friend and later biographer Peter Conradi is a Buddhist. She read Sekida's *Zen Training*, and engaged with it in MGM. Simone Weil too was drawn to Eastern philosophy, but eventually found greater affinity with Hinduism rather than Buddhism. Some of these influences will return in this book.

After I briefly described Iris Murdoch's thought to my friend Dae Gak, a Zen master, he exclaimed: 'She's a Buddhist!'[8] And he told me a Zen story:

> A student said to Master Ichu, 'Please write for me something of great wisdom'.
> Master Ichu picked up his brush and wrote one word: 'Attention'.
> The student said, 'Is that all?'
> The master wrote, 'Attention. Attention'.
> The student became irritable. 'That doesn't seem profound or subtle to me'.
> In response, Master Ichu wrote simply, 'Attention. Attention. Attention'.
> In frustration, the student demanded, 'What does this word attention mean?'
> Master Ichu replied, 'Attention means attention'.
>
> (Joko Beck 1993: 168)

I feel that frustration too, as Dae Gak knows to his chagrin. Simone Weil would say I am impatient, lacking precisely that attention which can stay with mysteries and paradoxes, without trying to get out of them by my own means. This whole book, as well, may show my misunderstanding of the Buddhist message, by trying to say in six chapters, a coda, and one introduction, what Master Ichu says in three words. But perhaps, the master would concede, these are meanderings of thought we need to go through, a

necessary part of the path that may lead to knowing attention without asking questions. Paraphrasing Murdoch at the start of IP, there are instinctively wise people and those that need to question and analyse, and as Zen recognises, seeing things as they are may require a long pilgrimage in which we lose familiarity with them. The wonder and loss of familiarity we experience when we do philosophy may be understood in this context.[9]

Notes

1 For more accounts of this sort of experience, in the context of a sociological reflection of the importance of the gaze in relation to homeless people, see Kramer and Hsieh (2019).
2 On seeing someone as a something (or 'reification') and its opposite ('recognition') see Axel Honneth's fundamental work (2007).
3 More recently, on her website, Adams writes about vegan-feminism as arising precisely from attention: 'Vegan-feminism … comes with an insistence "Pay attention!" Pay attention, *now*. The process of objectification/fragmentation/consumption can be interrupted by the process of attention/nowness/compassion' (Adams 2018: n.p.).
4 Typically: there are also other modes of attention, as we shall see in the final sections of Chapter 1.
5 On attention as bodily, and on this aspect not being explicitly embraced by Murdoch, see also the conclusion of Cordner's essay (2016).
6 My discussion on Murdoch's anthropocentrism, it should be noted, is based on her philosophy and not her novels, like the rest of this book. Some have suggested that Murdoch's novels are useful sources of environmental ethical thinking (see e.g. Oulton 2020). But what I am interested in here is what we can learn from her philosophy.
7 See also MGM 110, 372 and 377.
8 But then came to the conclusion that she is not quite.
9 As Murdoch writes, 'A study of philosophy may be likened to a catharsis, like that of the Zen Buddhist who begins with rivers and mountains, doubts rivers and mountains, then returns to rivers and mountains' (MGM 189).

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