

2 Murdochian Moral Vision

Rob Compaijen

2.1 Introduction

We regularly face the question of what we should do in the particular situations we find ourselves in. We are all aware, that is, of what Martha Nussbaum describes as “the sheer complexity and agonizing difficulty of choosing well.”¹ One way of responding to this complexity is through reflection or deliberation. One can ask such questions as: who are involved in the situation, which options for acting do I have, how do I weigh these options, and so forth. Another way of responding to the complexity is by ‘looking again.’ One can attend carefully to it, attempt to discern what is at stake and see what should be done.²

What I have rather loosely described as ‘looking again’ is an instance of what can be described more strictly as ‘moral vision’ or ‘moral perception’. Moral perception is commonly understood as the capacity and activity of discerning value in the world, discerning what, morally speaking, is at stake in the particular situations we face, discerning what we should do in those situations, and so forth.³ Yet, how should we understand this? What, exactly, is involved in such perceptual activity? In this chapter, I explore these questions by focusing on Iris Murdoch’s account of moral vision. One reason for doing so is that her account has been very important in the contemporary resurgence of interest in moral

1 Martha Nussbaum, “The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality,” in *Love’s Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 55.

2 Importantly, these responses do not contradict, let alone exclude one another. One can use the insights arrived at by looking again as the enriched input in the deliberative process. Or one can use an impasse in the reflective process as a reason to look again.

3 Recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in moral perception. See for example: Martha Nussbaum, “The Discernment of Perception”; Lawrence A. Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Timothy Chappell, “Moral Perception,” *Philosophy* 83 (2008): 421–37; Robert Audi, *Moral Perception* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Anna Bergqvist and Robert Cowan, eds., *Evaluative Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Werner Preston, “Moral Perception,” *Philosophy Compass* 15 (2020): 1–12.

perception. Another reason is that she develops a very comprehensive account of these matters.

The outline of this chapter is as follows. In Section 2.2, I will briefly discuss the background of Murdoch's account of moral vision. Next, in Section 2.3, I will focus on the notion of 'moral vision.' As we will see, Murdoch's account of moral vision functions in two ways: it is both a descriptive and a normative concept. In Section 2.4, I will elaborate the descriptive understanding of moral vision. The normative understanding will be the focus of Section 2.5. Finally, in Section 2.6, I will argue that Murdoch's thought overlooks the importance of deliberation in situations where we face pertinent moral choices.

2.2 The Background of Murdoch's Account of Moral Vision

Murdoch's most elaborate account of moral vision can be found in *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970). Here she develops her views on moral vision in discussion with a conception of moral philosophy that she thinks of as seriously misguided. Much of modern moral philosophy, Murdoch had already argued in several earlier papers, embodies an "exclusive emphasis on act and choice"⁴, and essentially thinks of moral life as "a series of overt choices which takes place in a series of specifiable situations."⁵ This is a picture of moral life in which it is the situation that requires me to choose that counts, morally speaking. During breakfast, I will have to choose how to respond to my partner after the fight we had last night; at work, I face the decision of who to let go now that the company needs to downsize; back home, my teenage daughter asks me to help her do her homework while I had just decided to visit my father whom I have not seen in a while. On the view Murdoch criticizes, what matters, morally speaking, are these moments, as well as the choices we make and the tangible, observable actions that flow from them.

Murdoch does not want to say that such critical moments of choice and our resulting actions are *not* important. Rather, her point is that focusing exclusively on choice and overt action overlooks the vital importance of how we look at the world. What the offending picture of modern moral philosophy overlooks, Murdoch argues, is that the options we have for choice and action are determined by our perception of the world. In her own words: "I can only choose within the world I can

4 Iris Murdoch, "Knowing the Void," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (London: Penguin Books, 1999 (1997)), 159.

5 Iris Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (London: Penguin Books, 1999 (1997)), 76–98.

see.”⁶ But what does “see” mean here? How does Murdoch understand the capacity for and activity of moral vision? Let me begin by unpacking the notion ‘moral vision.’

2.3 Unpacking the Notion of ‘Moral Vision’

In this section, I will draw out the contours of Murdoch’s conception of moral vision. I will do so by first briefly looking at Murdoch’s use of ‘vision’ (3.1) and then focus on the notion of ‘*moral* vision’ (3.2).

2.3.1. *Vision*

Murdoch believes vision has a central role in moral philosophy. Unsurprisingly, then, her texts employ, as Lawrence Blum observes, “several distinct visual metaphors – perceiving, looking, seeing, vision, and attention.”⁷ What is lacking here, I believe, is imagining. Imagination, on Murdoch’s view, is a crucial capacity in moral life, because, to give just one reason, it enables us to empathize: through imagination, we “picture”, for example, “what it is like for people to be in certain situations (unemployed, persecuted, very poor).”⁸ Moreover, as the verb ‘picture’ already suggests, Murdoch understands imagination in visual terms, characterizing it, for example, in terms of “the effortful ability to *see* what lies before one more clearly, more justly, to consider new possibilities.”⁹ Understanding that imagining is a form of moral vision is important, because it allows us to see that Murdoch’s conception of ‘vision’ typically goes beyond strict sensory perception. In fact, I take it that the way in which Murdoch conceives of moral vision problematizes any neat distinction between what we might call ‘literal’ and ‘figurative’ vision. When Murdoch tells us that moral vision has value for an object, or that, as we will see below, the primary object of moral vision is the individual person as an independent reality, she is extending beyond what an austere account of the content of perceptual experience would allow. Murdoch’s account of moral vision seems to involve, to put it in Sophie Grace Chappell’s words, “the kind of perception that is involved in ‘I see your determination to get this job.’”¹⁰

6 Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 37.

7 Lawrence A. Blum, “Visual Metaphors in Murdoch’s Moral Philosophy,” in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, ed. Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 307.

8 Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin Random House, 1992), 322.

9 *Ibid.*, Emphasis mine.

10 Sophie Grace Chappell, “The Eyes of a Child,” in *The Philosophy of Reenchantment*, ed. Michiel Meijer and Herbert DeVriese (London/New York: Routledge, 2020), 175.

2.3.2 Moral Vision

Turning to the notion of ‘moral vision’, it seems that, generally speaking, there are two ways to unpack it: it can be taken to refer to the *character* of vision as well as to the *object* of vision.¹¹ Let us first look at the *character* of moral vision as understood by Murdoch. An important reason for beginning here is that, on a Murdochian view, *how* we perceive the world determines *what* we will see. “‘Reality,’” Murdoch writes, is “that which is revealed to the patient eye of love.”¹² As this phrase indicates, Murdoch uses value terms to describe the nature of moral vision. Our view of the world can be just, patient, humble, loving, but also envious, narcissistic, malicious, selfish, and so forth. It is important to see that her views here are both descriptive and normative. They are *descriptive* because they indicate, again, that – *as a matter of fact* – how we perceive the world (whether our vision is loving, say, or selfish) determines what we will see. They are *normative*, however, because she believes that as our view of the world becomes more loving, our view of the world will thereby become more *accurate*, whereas if our view of things becomes more selfish, it will present us with an increasingly *distorted* picture of them. In Section 2.5, I will elaborate what this means. The normative character of Murdoch’s account of moral vision implies that moral vision should be understood as a *task* – as “something progressive, something infinitely perfectible.”¹³ Moral progress, on this understanding, involves the difficult process of the continuous attempt to look at things more lovingly in order to see them more accurately.

‘Moral vision’ tells us something about the *object* of vision as well. However, it proves quite difficult to elaborate what exactly Murdoch believes is the object (or, more accurately: are the objects) of moral vision. The reason for this is, I think, that she has a broad – and from the point of view of contemporary moral philosophy rather idiosyncratic – understanding of ‘the moral.’ In most of the contemporary literature on moral perception, it is primarily understood in terms of the perception of value and/or the perception of what, morally speaking, should be done in a given situation.¹⁴ While Murdoch, as we will see, is certainly sensitive to these conceptions of moral vision, her own account of these matters is more comprehensive. In what follows I will show that we can

11 Silvia Panizza uses the same distinction in her exposition of Murdoch’s account of moral vision. See: Silvia Panizza, “Moral Perception Beyond Supervenience: Iris Murdoch’s Radical Perspective,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 54 (2020): 273–88.

12 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 40.

13 *Ibid.*, 23.

14 Blum writes in this regard about “[t]he collapsing of the significance of moral perception into judgment of right action – and a consequential masking of its full value”. See: Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity*, 43.

(more or less) differentiate between three different kinds of objects of moral vision as understood by Murdoch.

First and foremost, Murdochian moral vision is the discernment of *reality*. Murdoch writes that “[a]ttention”, a term she typically uses to designate *accurate* perception, “is rewarded by a knowledge of reality.”¹⁵ In ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’, Murdoch had already given expression to this idea, writing that “as moral beings we are immersed in a reality which transcends us and [...] moral progress consists in awareness of this reality and submission to its purposes.”¹⁶ As it stands, the idea that ‘reality’ is the (primary) object of moral vision is, of course, quite uninformative. By describing it as a reality ‘which transcends us’ she gives it a little more substance, and this is taken a bit further in *The Sovereignty of Good* where she conceives of moral vision as the “progressive revelation of something which exists independently of me”; that is, “something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal.”¹⁷ Thus, I am in agreement with Bridget Clarke that, for Murdoch, ‘moral vision’ primarily “takes an ‘independent reality’ for its object, where this refers to anything that has an existence outside the mind of the perceiver.”¹⁸

One way to understand what this means, and to make it more tangible, is to recognize, as Clarke puts it, that “[i]ndividual *persons* are, for Murdoch, the independent realities par excellence.”¹⁹ By looking at the world lovingly one gains “knowledge of the individual”²⁰, and as the quality of moral vision increases one becomes more open to the realization that other persons are precisely that: *other* persons. One becomes increasingly sensitive to “the separateness and differentness of other people”, and this does not exclude but rather includes the realization that there are important similarities between oneself and other people because one comes to see “that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one’s own.”²¹

Murdochian moral vision, that is, crucially involves the perception of *particularity*. In one sense, of course, all vision is directed upon individual realities. We do not see universals. We do not see short-eared owls, but *these particular* short-eared owls; we do not see birch trees, but *these particular* birch trees; we do not see human beings, but *these particular*

15 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 89.

16 Murdoch, “Vision and Choice in Morality,” 96.

17 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 89.

18 Bridget Clarke, “Iris Murdoch and the Prospects for Critical Moral Perception,” in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, ed. Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 236–7.

19 *Ibid.*, 237.

20 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 28.

21 *Ibid.*, 66.

human beings. Yet, in another sense, we often do see such universals. For all sorts of reasons, we tend to reduce the individual realities we encounter to the more general categories we believe they represent. Murdoch's conception of 'moral vision' is meant to criticize this reductionist tendency. Properly perceiving this particular short-eared owl, birch tree or person makes us aware of their peculiarities. Murdoch's views on this aspect of moral vision, then, are distinctly normative as well. To the degree that moral vision becomes more adequate, Murdoch argues, one's ability to discern "the great surprising variety of the world" will improve, whereas, if moral vision remains un(der)developed, one "reduces all to a false unity."²²

On Murdoch's view, moral vision does not only involve the discernment of independent, individual reality. Moral vision also involves – and this is the second class of objects – the perception of *value*. This can be understood as perceiving what is good (bad) and what is right (wrong), but Murdoch typically talks about the more specific features of the world that are denoted by what Bernard Williams famously described as 'thick ethical concepts': courage, cruelty, selfishness, generosity, and so forth. Murdoch provides us with vivid examples of these concepts in the case – to be discussed more extensively below – of the mother and daughter-in-law: moral vision involves perceiving someone as, for instance, "unpolished", "lacking in dignity and refinement", "insufficiently ceremonious", "juvenile", or, instead, as "refreshingly simple", "spontaneous", "delightfully youthful" and so forth.²³ What these examples suggest is that moral vision involves the perception of properties that moral philosophers with a strong urge to systematize might argue have no place in the domain of 'the moral'. Murdoch's broad understanding of the object of moral vision also allows her to talk about the perception of aesthetic properties. A key point in Murdoch's philosophy, it seems to me, is that she does not want to say that, when we see someone as, for example, courageous and radiant, we are shifting between two qualitatively different kinds of perception. Hence, she writes that "[g]oodness and beauty are not to be contrasted, but are largely part of the same structure. [...] [A]esthetic situations are not so much analogies of morals as cases of morals."²⁴

A third understanding of the object of moral vision refers to the phenomenon of perceiving what should be done in the situation that confronts one. This is often highlighted as the key feature of moral perception. Here, then, the object of moral vision is understood as *the action(s) to be done*. (*Refraining* from action might, of course, also be perceived as what should be done in a given situation.) While Murdoch's

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 18.

24 Ibid., 41.

account of moral vision definitely involves this element, it is important to see that it would, on her view, be a mistake to separate the perception of value in a given situation from the perception of the action(s) to be done in that situation. This is one of the key insights implied in the thought that I can only choose within the world I can see. What we perceive as valuable in the situation we face will determine largely what we deem as viable options for action. “One is often compelled almost automatically by what one *can* see.”²⁵ Murdoch sometimes refers to this phenomenon by talking about being ‘obedient’ to the world we perceive. She writes: “If we picture the agent as compelled by obedience to the reality he can see, he will not be saying ‘This is right’, i.e., ‘I choose to do this’, he will be saying ‘This is A B C D’ (normative-descriptive words), and action will follow naturally.”²⁶ The perception of value properties – properties designated by ‘normative-descriptive words’ or ‘thick ethical concepts’ – in a situation will often give rise to action (or, again, the decision to refrain from action).

2.4 Mere Subjective Perception

In the above discussion of the contours of Murdochian moral vision, we came across the idea that Murdoch’s account functions in two different ways: ‘moral vision’ describes *both* how, as a matter of fact, we perceive the world and what that means for our moral lives, *and* refers to a normative understanding of how we should perceive the world. Other scholars are sensitive to (the importance of) this distinction as well. Margaret Holland uses ‘moral perception’ to designate the descriptive understanding of moral vision, and ‘moral attention’ to the normative understanding.²⁷ Blum distinguishes between ‘mere subjective perception’ to denote the former, and ‘attention’ to refer to the latter.²⁸ In this section, I will give more substance to our understanding of Murdochian moral vision by elaborating the descriptive understanding of moral vision as ‘mere subjective perception.’

Murdoch argues that, *as a matter of fact*, how we perceive the world has important ramifications for moral life. Moral vision, understood in this sense, “refers to how one sees the particulars of the circumstances

25 *Ibid.*, 37.

26 *Ibid.*, 42.

27 See: Margaret G. Holland, “Touching the Weights: Moral Perception and Attention,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 38 (1998): 299–312.

28 Blum’s interpretation is actually more complex, as he draws a further distinction between ‘attention’ as a *successful* and an *unsuccessful* “conscious and deliberate [attempt] to grasp a reality outside the self”. See: Blum, “Visual Metaphors in Murdoch’s Moral Philosophy,” 310.

with which one is confronted”²⁹, as Holland points out. Blum makes this more specific by arguing that ‘mere subjective perception’ refers “not only [to] what is *present* to the agent at any level of awareness, but also what is *salient* to the agent.”³⁰ Each of us views the world in a particular way, and the nature of that vision determines what we are aware of (and what we do not notice) as well as what stands out (and what is insignificant) in our experience of the world. Two people can find themselves in what in one sense can be described as the same situation, while experiencing it in significantly different ways because their perception of the situation is significantly different.

Suppose, for example, that two teachers, Anna and Sarah, moderate a student debate on religion and freedom of speech. Moderating the debate proves difficult as views on the matter vary and emotions are heated. Some students are passionate about the issue, taking time to express their views with confidence, others show signs of engagement but do not participate presumably because they fear they might embarrass themselves, and then there are some who seem to have no interest in the topic and seem to be bored. At a certain moment, Sarah sees how, after one student, Oliver, expresses his views rather harshly, another student, Emma, who had actively taken part in the debate, no longer seems willing to participate. After the debate, Sarah notices that Emma looks rather shaken, decides to ask her how she is feeling, and has a long conversation with her.

Looking back on the event, Anna tells Sarah that she was frustrated with students who were displaying their boredom. Sarah is surprised to hear this: she was not aware of students being bored. Anna, on the other hand, while noticing that Oliver’s words might have come across as unfriendly and sensing that they led to a change of atmosphere, mentions that she was unaware of the impact of Oliver’s words on Emma until she saw Sarah talk to Emma. Although they were, in one sense, in the same situation, Anna and Sarah perceived it differently. Phrasing this in Blum’s helpful terms, there was something that did not become *present* to Sarah’s awareness, and there was something that was present to Anna’s awareness although it did not become *salient* to her. Murdoch writes in this regard that “[w]e differ not only because we select different objects out of the same world but because *we see different worlds*.”³¹ And, to repeat, what we see determines which options for action we realistically can be said to have: “I can only act within the world I can *see*.”³² Whereas Sarah felt inclined to ask Emma how she was feeling because she noticed that Emma looked hurt, Anna was unable to act in this manner quite simply because she failed to notice the impact of Oliver’s words on Emma.

29 Holland, “Touching the Weights,” 301.

30 Blum, “Visual Metaphors in Murdoch’s Moral Philosophy,” 308.

31 Murdoch, “Vision and Choice in Morality,” 82.

32 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 37.

In the previous section, I argued that Murdochian moral vision has three ‘objects’: individual realities, value, and the action(s) to be done. These function in our example in the following way. With regard to the third ‘object’: as was already mentioned, Sarah saw an opportunity to comfort Emma, whereas Anna did not. With regard to the second: both moderators perceived such features as passion, confidence, engagement, and embarrassment. Anne was sensitive to boredom, while Sarah was not. Sarah, on the other hand, saw harshness, hurt, and being shaken, while Anna did not. Finally, were Anna and Sarah sensitive to the particularity of the students, did they see them as individual realities? Given the fictional nature of the example, this is, of course, an awkward question to answer. Yet, we could speculate that Anna was, perhaps, not sensitive to those she perceived as being bored, seeing them above all as the usual group of uninterested students. And we could construe Sarah as being sensitive to the ‘individual reality’ of who Emma is.

The example illustrates an understanding of moral vision as ‘mere subjective perception’. Blum writes that this conception of moral vision “refers simply to how a situation presents itself subjectively to the agent, with no implication of veridicality.”³³ I reflected on Anna’s and Sarah’s take on the debate and highlighted the differences in their perceptions of the situation, but was not yet fully concerned with the *accuracy* of their representations. Sarah did not notice that some students were bored. While Anna did notice this, we might still ask whether her perception was *truthful*: were the students who Anne perceived as being bored *in fact* bored? Was Sarah’s (initial) take on the situation that became salient to her – that Emma looked hurt, and, more particularly, was hurt by Oliver’s words – accurate? Anna, to conclude, did not see that Emma was hurt at all – thereby overlooking a feature of significant moral importance. Moral vision, on Murdoch’s view, can be (and often is) one-sided, biased, *distorted* – presenting us with an inaccurate picture of the world. The pivotal moral task we all face in our lives is to counter that distortion by cultivating clarity of vision. This brings the distinctly normative way in which Murdoch understands the concept of ‘moral vision’ into view.

2.5 Attention

In order to introduce this normative understanding of moral vision, I will turn to Murdoch’s influential example of the strained relationship between a mother and her daughter-in-law. Murdoch writes:

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

33 Blum, “Visual Metaphors in Murdoch’s Moral Philosophy,” 309.

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. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son married beneath him.³⁴

This is the initial way in which M is described as looking at D, something that is underscored by Murdoch's characterization of M's perceptions as her "*first* thoughts about D."³⁵ Importantly, Murdoch presents M as "an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism."³⁶ M, that is, has the resources to criticize the way in which she looks at D, and this is what she goes on to do. "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.'"³⁷ This attempt to look again, Murdoch asks us to imagine, has an important effect: "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."³⁸

This provides us with an illustration of what it means for moral vision to be transformed. There is, first, M's moral vision that represents D in a certain way; subsequently, M realizes that this representation might involve a distorted vision of D, which motivates her to take another look; and then M's vision of D improves to the effect that she perceives D more accurately and, correspondingly, discovers that her first representation of D was, indeed, distorted. Now, Murdoch typically uses the notion of 'attention' to denote such accurate perception of the world. What, on Murdoch's view, is attention more specifically?

Part of the answer to this question can already be formulated, based on my analysis in Section 3 above. In terms of its objects, attention allows us to perceive the particularity of individual realities, become acutely aware of values, and discover what it is that we should do. In terms of its character, attention can be described in 'virtue terms': attention is a loving, just, patient, humble way of looking at the world. Because M learns to look at D in a loving, just, patient, humble way, she is able to see D for who she is, and discover the value that resides in D. However, although this is correct, it is still rather uninformative as an account of attention. Another, richer way of presenting Murdoch's account of attention can be brought forward by answering to a sceptical response with regard to Murdoch's thought. In what respect, one might ask, is M's change in her

34 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 17.

35 *Ibid.*, Emphasis mine.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*, 17–18.

perception of D an *improvement*? How, exactly, is attention an undistorted, clear form of moral vision?

Answering this question brings us to the mystical nature of Murdoch's philosophy. Her thought on attention is largely indebted to Simone Weil. For both authors, attention has an important critical, perhaps even destructive function: through attention we "silence and expel self"³⁹, as Murdoch puts it. She famously observes that "[i]n the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego."⁴⁰ Attention helps us to counter the devastating influence of the self, because "[t]he direction of attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from self."⁴¹ How does this work?

The idea that 'the fat relentless ego' is the enemy in moral life should be understood, I think, as saying that the ego or self is the primary source of distortion in our view of the world. The morally problematic nature of the self, that is, does not primarily express itself in the selfish acts that flow from it. Selfish action, to be sure, is morally problematic, but – keeping with Murdoch's idea that one can only act within the world one can see – it is rooted in the deeper problem of having a fundamentally selfish view of things. As we have seen, the primary object of moral vision is an individual reality, and the more accurate our moral vision becomes – that is, the more attentive we are – the better we will be able to discern the particularity and independence of others. Understanding the self as distorting our moral vision, then, means that

we may fail to see the individual because we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own into which we try to draw things from outside, not grasping their reality and independence, making them into dream objects of our own.⁴²

What does this mean more concretely? In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch writes: "We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world."⁴³ Murdoch, it seems to me, holds the view that the more one's self dominates one's view of the world, the more one will be conceiving of others in self-referential terms. One will see another person predominantly or even merely as someone who one can care for, as someone whose words and actions have been really hurtful in the past, as someone whose approval or recognition we

39 *Ibid.*, 64.

40 *Ibid.*, 52.

41 *Ibid.*, 66.

42 Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (London: Penguin Books, 1999 (1997)), 216.

43 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 84.

need, and so forth. This is one way in which the self distorts our view of the world: it presents us with a picture of others that reduces them to functions of our self-concern, concealing their independence. Another way in which our view of the world is distorted by the self is that it has a strong tendency of turning our attention (understood in its everyday, non-normative sense) away from the world, towards our inner lives. “The difficulty”, Murdoch observes, “is to keep the attention fixed upon the real situation and to prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy and despair.”⁴⁴

On Murdoch’s view, then, M’s change in her perception of D should be seen as an *improvement* in this sense: M, by looking again at (attending to) D, is able to transcend the self-concerned biases towards D that determined her initial perceptions of D. Consequently, attention, on this understanding, qualifies as undistorted and clear vision when the self, with its distorting influences, has been silenced and expelled. (In line with Murdoch’s own discussion, I deliberately present attention in idealized terms here; this will be an important point of discussion in the next section.) Now, importantly, attention is not a matter of “simply opening one’s eyes.”⁴⁵ Given the force with which the self influences our perception of things, it is, as we have seen, “a *task* to come to see the world as it is.”⁴⁶ And this is where the virtue terms that Murdoch uses to describe the character of accurate moral vision return. Learning to become more loving, just, patient, and humble purifies, as it were, our capacity for moral vision. Becoming a more loving, just, patient, humble person just *is* diminishing the influence of the self. Hence Murdoch’s observation in the final paragraph of *The Sovereignty of Good* that “[t]he humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are.”⁴⁷

2.6 Perception and Deliberation

Up to this point, I have closely followed Murdoch’s thoughts on moral vision, trying to present them as accurately as is possible in the limited space of this chapter. In this final section, I want to raise and discuss a critical issue regarding Murdochian moral vision. Murdoch’s account of moral perception, I suggest, neglects the importance of deliberation.⁴⁸ Deliberation – which I understand as an interpersonal or intrapersonal mode of practical reasoning that weighs the options for action we have, with the aim of concluding which course of action is to be performed –

44 Ibid., 91.

45 Ibid., 38.

46 Ibid., 91.

47 Ibid., 103–4.

48 This is a criticism raised by Blum as well. I am indebted to his excellent discussion of this issue. See: Blum, “Visual Metaphors in Murdoch’s Moral Philosophy,” 319–23.

seems an important aspect of moral life.⁴⁹ Yet, it seems as if Murdoch holds the implausible view that moral vision should (and in fact is able to) do all the moral work.

An important reason why Murdoch's account of moral vision neglects the importance of deliberation is, I think, that deliberation seems to imply uncertainty. Typically, we deliberate when we are unclear about what to do. However, such unclarity, according to Murdoch, is evidence that our capacity for moral vision is not fully developed, that we are (and have been) insufficiently attentive. She writes: "If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at."⁵⁰ Ideally, that is, our moral lives are marked by "a kind of 'necessity'."⁵¹ Murdoch explains this practical necessity as follows:

This is something of which saints speak and which any artist will readily understand. The 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'.⁵²

And this is "an obedience which ideally reaches a position where there is no choice."⁵³

Ideally, then, one does not have to deliberate about what to do since the right course of action (which, again, might be to abstain from action) is, as it were, presented to one. I am less optimistic, however, and not simply for the reason that I am sceptical about the possibility of ideal moral vision. Even if we accept the possibility of 'ideal attention' – that is, the possibility of an agent who has managed to silence the self and whose view on things is fully shaped by love, justice, patience, and humility – then it still seems conceivable that two (or more) ideally attentive agents discern different features in the same situation, or perceive them as differing in salience. One important reason why this is so is that our capacity for moral vision is shaped by experience, and differences in experience will often influence how and what we perceive the world to be.⁵⁴ Moreover, even *one and the same* ideally attentive agent might

49 Thus, I wholeheartedly agree with Akeel Bilgrami who argues that, although ethics should primarily be conceived as a "perceptual discipline", this is not "to suggest that *deliberative* and reflective elements are not important in ethics." See: Akeel Bilgrami, "The Visibility of Value," *Social Research* 83 (2016): 931.

50 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 40.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., 41.

54 As is argued, for example, by Nussbaum. Commenting on Aristotle's views on practical wisdom, Nussbaum writes: "[P]ractical perception [...] is gained only through a long process of living and choosing that develops the agent's resourcefulness and responsiveness" (Nussbaum, "The Discernment of Perception," 75). This is what

see a situation differently depending on, for example, how much time she has to fathom a complex situation, or on the experiences she undergoes in between the different moments she attends to it. Since, then, differences in perception and hence in possible courses of action seem bound to arise even in idealized circumstances, deliberation is important here. And this is, of course, *a fortiori* true for non-idealized situations. Quite remarkably, however, Murdoch does not discuss the importance of deliberation for such circumstances. Instead, the proper response to uncertainty about what to do, on her view, seems to consist in ‘looking again’. (The reader will have noticed that by now we have returned to the beginning of this chapter.) Like M in Murdoch’s example, we need to look again at the situation we find ourselves in, perceiving it with more love, justice, patience, and humility. (In contrast to what is suggested by the example of M and D, ‘looking again’ is typically not something we can decide to do ‘on the spot’. Learning to look at things more attentively is, as Murdoch herself often observes, an ongoing process.) Now, I do not want to deny the importance of ‘looking again’ at a situation that leaves us uncertain about what to do. Yet, the persistent nature of such uncertainty presses us to acknowledge the importance of deliberation as well. Thus, on the Murdochian view that I have explored in this chapter, it seems that, indeed, moral vision should (and in fact is able to do) all the moral work. And this, I think, is an unpersuasive feature of an otherwise very appealing account of ethical life.

Bibliography

- Audi, Robert. *Moral Perception*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Bergqvist, Anna, and Robert Cowan, eds. *Evaluative Perception*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Bilgrami, Akeel. “The Visibility of Value.” *Social Research* 83 (2016): 917–43.
- Blum, Lawrence A. *Moral Perception and Particularity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- . “Visual Metaphors in Murdoch’s Moral Philosophy.” In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, edited by Justin Broackes, 307–23. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Chappell, Sophie Grace. “The Eyes of a Child.” In *The Philosophy of Reenchantment*, edited by Michiel Meijer and Herbert De Vriese, 161–77. London/New York: Routledge, 2021.
- Chappell, Timothy. “Moral Perception.” *Philosophy* 83 (2008): 421–37.

Aristotle had argued in book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he writes that “practical wisdom is of the particular, which becomes graspable through experience” and, referring to people of practical wisdom, that “since experience has given them an eye they see correctly” (quoted from: Nussbaum, “The Discernment of Practical Reason,” 75).

- Clarke, Bridget. "Iris Murdoch and the Prospects for Critical Moral Perception." In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, edited by Justin Broackes, 227–53. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Holland, Margaret G. "Touching the Weights: Moral Perception and Attention." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 38 (1998): 299–312.
- Murdoch, Iris. *The Sovereignty of Good*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970.
- . *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. London: Penguin Random House, 1992.
- . "Knowing the Void." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter Conradi, 157–60. London: Penguin Books, 1999 (1997).
- . "The Sublime and the Good." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter Conradi, 205–20. London: Penguin Books, 1999 (1997).
- . "Vision and Choice in Morality." In *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter Conradi, 76–98. London: Penguin Books, 1999 (1997).
- Nussbaum, Martha C. "The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality." In *Love's Knowledge*, 54–105. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Panizza, Silvia. "Moral Perception Beyond Supervenience: Iris Murdoch's Radical Perspective." *Journal of Value Inquiry* 54 (2020): 273–88.
- Preston, Werner. "Moral Perception." *Philosophy Compass* 15 (2020): 1–12.