

IRIS MURDOCH: MORAL VISION

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In the essays which make up *The Sovereignty of Good*, Iris Murdoch gives us a picture of moral life in which ‘the metaphor of vision [is] almost irresistibly suggested’. This chapter aims to clarify the role played by the metaphor of vision in Murdoch’s philosophical thinking. I’ll examine two different things which might be meant by the term ‘moral vision’: vision of moral things or vision which is itself moral. The suggestion will be that whilst both capture something important about Murdoch’s work, each may mislead about what is distinctive in her views. For Murdoch, I shall suggest, there is no distinctively *moral* vision. There is only vision: a loving gaze directed upon the reality of others.

1. Introduction

The first symposium of the 1956 Joint Sessions of the Aristotelian Society and Mind Association took place on a Saturday morning at the University College of Wales in Aberystwyth. The title of the symposium was ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’ and the speakers were R.W. Hepburn and Iris Murdoch. Hepburn’s paper aimed to expand our conception of morality beyond those familiar judgements that involve a commitment to universalizability, one ought not to kill and so on. He takes seriously the idea that we aim to fashion

our lives into meaningful patterns and argues that this project can itself be a genuine moral activity, even when it involves a richer and more personalised idiolect than the simple evaluation of one's life against the yardstick of universalizable moral principles.¹ Murdoch's response is that of the radical comrade-in-arms rather than carping critic. She focuses on a contrast between those views which centre moral thinking around the notion of *choice* and those which centre it on the notion of *vision*. Hepburn is right, Murdoch says, to emphasise the fact that understanding, interpretation, and reflection play a role in moral thinking. But he is wrong to think of these as 'merely preliminaries to choice' (VCM 41). There are moments when 'what is needed is not a renewed attempt to specify the facts, but a fresh vision' (VCM 51). Moral differences are 'differences of vision not of choice' (VCM 53).

This symposium marked Murdoch's first publication in moral philosophy.² It was also the last piece she published in the mainstream of philosophy journals. It was not until the lectures and eventual publication of the three papers which make up *The Sovereignty of Good* that we were to see the full development of ideas hinted at in 'Vision and Choice in Morality' and a portrayal of moral life in which 'the metaphor of vision [is] almost irresistibly suggested' (IP 22/316-7).

The aim of this chapter is to clarify the role played by the metaphor of vision in Murdoch's philosophical thinking. It is a metaphor which runs through her writing from 'Vision and Choice in Morality' to *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. My focus here will be primarily confined to the essays which make up *The Sovereignty of Good*. The suggestion will be that whilst there is no doubt that the term 'moral vision' captures something important about Murdoch's work, it is an open question whether the phrase, with all its resonances, is helpful in capturing the view that Murdoch holds. For Murdoch, I shall suggest, there is no distinctively *moral* vision. There is only vision: a just and loving gaze directed upon the reality of others (cf. IP 33/327).

¹ (Hepburn 1956)

² Her paper 'Metaphysics and Ethics' was presented on BBC Radio the year before but was not published until 1957.

Two bits of housekeeping before we begin. First, my focus in what follows will be the elucidation of Murdoch's view. I will not attempt here to reconstruct her arguments for the claims she makes. This is in part because figuring out exactly what Murdoch thought is task enough. But it is also because there is a deep strand in Murdoch's thinking which takes her picture of moral life to be recommended in part by what we are 'irresistibly inclined to say' (IP 16/327). To this end, to show that what we are irresistibly inclined to say is not incoherent may already carry suasive force.³

Second, the title of this chapter is 'moral vision' and it is metaphors of *vision* which dominate Murdoch's work. But one might wonder whether the term 'moral perception' is to be preferred and whether there are differences between vision and perception which counsel in favour of using one or the other.⁴ Murdoch does sometimes use the term 'perception' when characterising her view—e.g. at IP 37/330, SGC 93/379—but it is the language of vision which predominates. I will comment briefly later in this chapter about possible differences between vision and perception which bear on the question of which to use in characterising Murdoch's views but until then I will use Murdoch's own terms without implication of a philosophically substantive contrast with some more general notion of moral perception.

2. Moral Vision

Murdoch's views on the role that vision plays in moral thinking need to be set against the background of her wider philosophical commitments. Let me mention three.

First, *Realism*. The world contains such properties as kindness, foolishness, mean-spiritedness, and so on. These properties are a genuine part of reality—and someone who comes to know about such properties comes to know something about how things are in reality.⁵ It follows, for Murdoch, that we must have a notion of 'nature' which is broad enough to encompass these

³ Cf. *Philosophical Investigations*, §127 and §128 on theses in philosophy.

⁴ Many discussions of Murdoch's views use the more general term, e.g. (Blum 1994), (Holland 1998), (Clarke 2012), (Clifton 2013), (Panizza 2019).

⁵ See, especially, IP 36-41/329-334; OGG 57-58/347-348; SGC 88/374.

features as natural, an implication of which, Murdoch thinks, is that certain etiolated scientific conceptions of the natural must be rejected.⁶

Second, *Knowability*. We are sometimes in a position to know about these aspects of reality. And that means that we possess a *way* of coming to know about these features.⁷ The notion of ‘coming to know’ here involves both a theoretical and practical component. It has a theoretical component, since in coming to know about someone’s mean-spiritedness, I come to know something about how things are laid out before me. And it has a practical component since, for many of these features, knowing how things are laid out will involve coming to know what is to be done. When we know how things stand with regard to these features of the world, the knowledge we gain is both theoretical and practical.⁸

Finally, *Concept Involvement*. Our awareness of these aspects of reality is mediated by the concepts which are available to us. A subject’s conceptual scheme—understood in a maximally wide sense to include her whole outlook, ways of thinking, background beliefs and so on—can determine which aspects of reality a subject is able to pick out. Different schemes of concepts will enable subjects to pick out different aspects of reality, and shifts in our conceptual schemes may shift, either negatively or positively, the range of things which we are able to pick out.⁹

These three commitments are unified by Murdoch’s notion of *loving attention*.¹⁰ Attention, for Murdoch, is the process by which we come to see the world for how it really is. To attend to things is to look at them lovingly and justly. And it unifies Murdoch’s three commitments. Attention allows us knowledge of reality; such knowledge can compel us to act in a certain way;

⁶ See e.g. IP 36-37/329-330.

⁷ Cf. (Austin 1946) on the propriety of the question ‘How do you know?’ when faced with a claim to knowledge.

⁸ See, especially, IP 39/332; OGG 57/347.

⁹ See, e.g., IP 31/324-5 and (Gomes 2013) for discussion. One important issue, which I won’t discuss here, is how Murdoch’s realism is to be made compatible with her emphasis on conceptual involvement—or, as is sometimes put, how Murdoch can secure objectivity given the role that subjective outlooks play in moral vision. See (Antonaccio 2000), (Blum 1994, 12-64), (Diamond 1996), (Panizza 2019) for discussion.

¹⁰ See the chapter on ATTENTION elsewhere in this volume.

and it is shaped by the conceptual schemes we operate within. This final point explains why loving attention can be *improved*. We can change the concepts we use when attending to others and to attend lovingly is to aim at perfection as regulative ideal.¹¹

Where does moral vision fit into this picture? In ‘Vision and Choice’, Murdoch uses the metaphor of vision in two connected ways. She first picks up on Hepburn’s discussion of an individual’s ‘vision of a good life’ (VCM 21) and uses the metaphor when referring to that broad ethical outlook—the ‘total vision of life’ (VCM 39)—against which we take our life to have some sort of meaning or pattern.¹² But by the end of the essay she has moved to talking about our status as ‘moral beings... immersed in a reality which transcends us’ and moral vision is now purposed to describe an ‘awareness of this reality and submission to its purpose’ (VCM 56).

These two uses of the metaphor of vision need not be connected. Higher education institutions liberally pepper their websites with statements of outlook and vision but these carry no implication of there being a reality of which our universities are aware. The suggestion of ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’ is that there *is* a connection in the case of the moral thinking of human agents. Someone’s outlook, in the sense of the background ways in which she makes sense of the world, can precisely be an *outlook*, one which thereby makes available to her some stretch of the world. Murdoch takes this idea to have Platonic heritage (F&S, 439).¹³ And the essays in *The Sovereignty*

¹¹ See especially IP 27-28/321-2. Murdoch makes a further claim, which she takes to be of central importance, that the change in our concepts which tends towards perfection also tends towards privacy. See IP 28-9/322 and cf. VCM 45-6. It is a delicate question how this tendency towards privacy coheres with her commitment to realism and not one I shall pursue here.

¹² See M&E 71, 73, VCM 42f.

¹³ Justin Broackes (2012, 9 fn.24) cites *Republic* VII 520c as an example of Plato’s imagery of moral vision. Another example is at *Republic* VII 517b-c: ‘In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it.’

of Good extend, develop, and deepen this connection. Moral vision is an awareness of reality shaped by the scheme of concepts with which we operate.

So much in broad brushstrokes. But how are we to understand the details of this picture? Why should visual metaphors be so natural in developing this account and how should we understand their use? I want to pursue this question by means of a distinction between two senses of the term ‘moral vision’. It is a term which is ambiguous in a number of ways but the distinction I want to pursue is that between moral vision as vision of moral things and moral vision as vision which is itself moral. Let me elucidate each in turn.¹⁴

First, there is moral vision as vision of moral things. This way of using the term is comparable to the way in which developmental psychologists talk of ‘object perception’ or the way in which evolutionary theorists talk of ‘predator perception’. These pick out particular capacities—the capacity to perceive objects, the capacity to perceive predators—which are supposed to be perceptual in some interesting way and which play an important role in certain explanatory projects. On this first disambiguation, moral vision is simply the capacity to perceive some aspect of the moral domain, a capacity which Murdoch alights upon to explain certain aspects of our moral lives.

Second, there is moral vision as vision which is itself moral. Here the natural comparisons are ‘blurry vision’ or ‘fleeting perception’. Blurry vision is not vision of things which are blurry and a fleeting perception is not perception of a fleeting. On this second disambiguation, moral vision is vision which is moral in some way and Murdoch’s use of the term would connote a willingness to expand the objects of moral evaluation to include such processes as the visual activity involved in looking at another person. These two different ways of understanding the term ‘moral vision’ might each be

¹⁴ Cf. Margaret Holland’s distinction between moral perception and moral attention (1998, pp.307-310) and the related distinctions drawn in (Panizza 2019, 275) and (Clifton 2013). (Blum 2012) makes some further helpful distinctions, including the important contrast between perceptual language which entails that things are as they are perceived to be and perceptual language which does not, a contrast which elsewhere might be marked by a distinction between factive and non-factive verbs.

used to explicate Murdoch's use of visual metaphors. We will consider them in turn.

3. Vision of Moral Things

Let us start with the idea that moral vision is vision of moral things. This view takes moral vision to be analogous to, say, colour vision. Just as colour vision involves seeing things as coloured, moral vision involve seeing things as possessing moral features. Recent discussions of moral perception have tended to use the term in this way.¹⁵ And applied to Murdoch, the idea would be that her use of visual language evinces a commitment to the thought that perception presents us with moral features of the environment and that a well-placed individual can use such perception to come to know something of the moral situation in which she finds herself.

It is important to note that someone who uses the term 'moral vision' in this way is not committed to the claim that moral vision picks out a determinate of the determinable perception. The claim is not that we have, in addition to the five familiar senses, some additional moral sense. For one can possess a capacity to perceive some objects or features of the environment without the results of exercising that capacity being a *way* of perceiving the world. This is important because there is no suggestion in Murdoch that we have some special moral way of perceiving the world, nor does she express sympathy for those views in the history of moral philosophy which might naturally be understood as involving an additional moral sense.¹⁶ The first suggestion is not, then, that Murdoch believes in the existence of a moral sense but only that she is committed to our being able to perceive moral features of the world.

Even at this level of generality, we can see why this idea might be a helpful way to understand Murdoch's overall picture. Perception in general presents us with features of our environment and it is by presenting us with features

¹⁵ E.g. (Audi 2013), (Cowan 2015a), (Werner 2016).

¹⁶ Murdoch's emphasis on the perceptual aspect of moral vision contrasts notably with the emphasis on emotions and feelings in Hutcheson's (1725, 1728) account of moral sense and with the intellectual aspect of apprehension stressed by Price's (1758) form of ethical intuitionism.

of our environment that it puts us in a position to know about those features. Thus, if perception presents us with moral features of the world, then moral vision can be a source of knowledge, exactly as Murdoch holds. And since we ordinarily think of perception as presenting us with some aspect of reality, the suggestion accords with Murdoch's insistence of a moral reality. Most importantly, since perceptual experiences can in general be shaped by our beliefs, desires, knowledge, and moods, there is room for someone who takes perception to present us with moral features to allow that our scheme of concepts determines the character of any such moral vision. This captures Murdoch's insistence on the connection between one's general outlook or scheme of concepts and the things that are available to be seen. Just as the visual experiences of the ornithologist will differ from that of the bored suburbanite, so too will the visual experiences of the kind-hearted differ from those of the selfish toad.¹⁷

This first sense of 'moral vision' thus looks well-placed to capture much of what Murdoch wants from her use of visual language. But it is too literal in its understanding. According to this first reading, when Murdoch use visual imagery, she means to draw our attention to the fact that perception can present us with the moral features of situations just as it can present us with colours, shapes, objects, and so on. This no doubt captures something of the way in which Murdoch urges us to broaden our conception of the things of which we can become aware.¹⁸ But it sits ill at ease with Murdoch's repeated insistence that her use of visual language is *metaphorical*:

Further, is not the *metaphor* of vision almost irresistibly suggested to anyone who, without philosophical prejudice, wishes to describe the situation? Is it not the natural *metaphor*? (IP 22/316-7, my emphases)

What is needed is a reorientation which will provide an energy of a different kind, from a different source. Notice the *metaphors* of orientation and of looking. (OGG 54/345, my emphasis)

¹⁷ See (Cowan 2015b) for the application of this idea to moral perception and (Siegel 2012) for support for the general thesis.

¹⁸ See (VCM 38-41) on the data of moral theorising.

The first suggestion takes Murdoch to hold that perception presents things as having moral features just as it presents us with things as having colours. But this looks like a refusal to take her at her metaphorical word.

How seriously should we take Murdoch's claims to be speaking metaphorically? Seriously, I think. Murdoch had careful things to say on the use of metaphors throughout her writings. In her first published paper, 'Thinking and Language', she emphasises the ineliminable use of metaphors in characterising our thoughts and experiences.¹⁹ And at the start of 'The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts' she writes, in the context of the metaphor of vision specifically, that:

it seems to me impossible to discuss certain kinds of concepts without resort to metaphor, since the concepts are themselves deeply metaphorical and cannot be analysed into non-metaphorical components without a loss of substance. (SGC 75/363)

Murdoch's views on the ineliminability of metaphors mean that we should not expect to be able to replace her metaphor of vision with something less metaphorical. But nor should we treat it as a biological claim about the visual system.

Consider, then, a less literal version of the first suggestion. One might agree that moral vision is vision of moral things without taking this to be a claim about the content of perceptual experiences. An alternative is to read Murdoch's use of visual language as pointing to the fact that we are sensitive to the moral features of the world. Since perception is, in general, a form of sensitivity—a receptive capacity, as Kant puts in at the start of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A19/B33)—the fact that we are sensitive to the moral features of the world would explain the naturalness of using perceptual language when characterising the nature of that sensitive capacity. But we can say this without ascribing to her the view that perception itself literally presents us with moral features of the world.

¹⁹ See T&L 32.

This metaphorical version of the first suggestion retains the advantages of its more literal cousin. Sensitivity in general may be thought of as a mode of knowledge directed on something external. It can be shaped by one's upbringing, character, wider outlook, and so on. And imaginative exercises might help in extending the range of things to which we are sensitive. This all fits with Murdoch's claims, including her insistence on the importance of imagination in determining our vision.²⁰ And it gives us a promising way to develop the first reading: moral vision is a sensitivity to the moral requirements which are imposed in certain situations and the deliverances of this sensitivity are a kind of knowledge, one which can spur the sensitive soul to action without any process of inference. This reading explains the features of Murdoch's account whilst making clear precisely why the visual metaphors are so appropriate.

Something like this general picture is endorsed by John McDowell and both the influence of Murdoch on McDowell and the tendency to read Murdoch through the lens of McDowell's important and influential framework have made it tempting to ascribe this view to Murdoch.²¹ McDowell's own account goes beyond these initial commitments in ways which look especially amenable to an understanding of Murdoch. McDowell holds that sensitivity to moral requirements is a character trait and thus that virtue itself just is sensitivity to moral requirements (McDowell 1979, 332-3). This fits well with Murdoch's insistence on the importance of the virtues when characterising our awareness of reality (e.g. SGC 82/369, 91/376-7). And McDowell insists that this conception of virtue is motivated by the uncodifiability of moral principles just as Murdoch claims that the good cannot be 'taped', that it always lies beyond our capture (OGG 61/350).

The idea that moral vision is vision of moral things thus gives us a pleasing way to understand the relevance of visual imagery to Murdoch. The metaphor of vision is appropriate because we are sensitive to the moral features of

²⁰ On imagination, see IP 36/329 and cf. her comments on Hampshire and imagination in DPR (198-199) and the discussion in (Altorf 2008, ch.4) and (Clarke 2018, §V).

²¹ For McDowell's views see especially (McDowell 1978, 1979). Bridget Clarke (2012, 2018) helpfully sets out the commonalities between McDowell and Murdoch. (McNaughton 1988) and (Chappell 2008) offer related ways of avoiding the overly literal reading. On McDowell's relation to Murdoch, see (Broackes 2012, 7-12, 17-18).

situations; because this sensitivity allows knowledge of the moral domain; and because such sensitivity is shaped by the concepts we possess and the imaginative processes we undertake. But complications arise when we consider the second sense of ‘moral vision’. We turn to that next.

4. Vision that is Moral

On the second way of disambiguating the phrase, moral vision is vision which is itself moral, just as accurate vision is vision which is itself accurate. One way to understand this view is as expanding the domain of moral evaluation to include such things as our activities of looking, listening, and so on. Applying this second sense of the term to Murdoch, the claim would be that Murdoch’s visual imagery showcases her commitment to the claim that inner activities are just as important as outer actions when it comes to moral life.²²

How can vision itself be moral? Consider the role that effort and imagination play for Murdoch in our achieving accurate vision:

I can only choose within the world I can *see*, in the moral sense of ‘see’ which implies that clear vision is the result of moral imagination and moral effort. There is also of course ‘distorted vision’... (IP 36/329)

Freedom is not strictly the exercise of the will, but rather the experience of *accurate* vision which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action (OGG 65/354, my emphasis; cf. IP 17-18/313, 22/317).

These passages connect clear and accurate vision with moral imagination and moral effort. The kind of clear and accurate vision which occasions action is one which requires effort and imagination.

Why should moral effort be expended in bringing about clear and accurate vision? Murdoch traces failures of vision back to ‘the fat relentless ego’, to

²² See especially (IP 41-42/334) for material in this vein. Margaret Holland’s focus on moral attention can be seen as a way of emphasising this second sense of moral vision. See her (1998, pp.307-310). Clifton (2013) makes a forceful case for the importance of this aspect of Murdoch’s view. Cf. (Bommarito 2018, ch.5) for a recent defence of the idea that episodes of attention can be morally assessable independently of their connection to overt action.

‘mechanical energy of an egocentric kind’ (OGG 51/342), to ‘personal fantasy’ and that ‘tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one’ (OGG 57/348). Elsewhere she adds ‘[o]bsession, prejudice, envy, anxiety, ignorance, greed, neurosis, and so on...’ (F&S 426).²³ These things distort our vision, they form a falsifying veil (SGC 82/369) which prevents us from seeing the world. If we are to see what is really there, we need to undergo a process of purification (OGG 67/356) or ‘unselfing’ (SGC 82/369) and find an alternative source of energy which counteracts the egocentric energy provided by personal fantasy. This is difficult and unending. Accurate vision is moral vision because it is a moral achievement.²⁴

These passages suggest that the second sense of ‘moral vision’ captures something important about Murdoch’s use of visual imagery: moral vision is vision that is itself moral and vision is moral when it is the result of effort and imagination. On this way of understanding Murdoch’s visual imagery, her intent is to draw out an analogy between the way in which our visual awareness of the world can be blocked and the ways in which we can fail to know how to behave. Social convention, fantasy, the ego—these get in the way of our knowing what to do just as a blindfold prevents us from seeing what is there to be seen. The removal of these obstacles can be a moral achievement, and in this sense it is appropriate to talk about vision which is moral.

This give us, then, an alternative way to understand Murdoch’s use of visual imagery. How does it compare to the first suggestion—that moral vision is vision of moral things? The two look compatible. As P.F. Strawson once emphasised, sensitive capacities in general are subject to disabling condition which prevent their operation (1974, 79). So one might take Murdoch’s use of visual metaphors to involve both connotations: we are sensitive to the

²³ See (Holland 2012) and (Clarke 2012) on the barriers posed by ‘social convention and neurosis’ (S&G 216) and cf. Kant’s comments on the barriers posed by the ‘dear self’ (*Groundwork* 4:407) and the ‘dishonesty, by which we throw dust in our own eyes’ (*Religion* 6:38).

²⁴ On the need for an alternative source of energy, see Justin Broackes’ insightful comments on the analogies between grace and the energy obtained by attending to the Good (2012, 56-57) and compare the role that the fire plays in Murdoch’s wonderful reading of Plato’s allegory of the cave (SGC 98/382-3).

moral realm and the accuracy or otherwise of that sensitivity is dependent on the displacement of certain egocentric occluders, a displacement which takes moral effort and imagination. Someone who takes this view will understand Murdoch as holding that we are sensitive to the moral domain; that our sensitivity to the moral domain is determined in part by our scheme of concepts; that the deliverances of this sensitivity occasion (theoretical and practical) knowledge; and that there are barriers to such sensitivity, most notably our egocentric energy, which must be overcome in order for our capacity for moral vision to present us with aspects of reality.

But this concord underplays, I think, the tensions between the first and second senses of 'moral vision'. For the question is not just whether Murdoch thinks there can be barriers to accurate vision—that much should be common currency—but whether Murdoch's use of visual metaphors evinces a commitment to our possessing a sensitivity to the moral domain or whether it commits her only to the importance of moral effort and imagination in achieving accurate vision. And there are some passages which support the latter interpretation at the expense of the first.

Consider the following striking passage:

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. (OGG 68/357)

Murdoch claims here that the same barriers prevent us from seeing a blade of grass as prevent us from seeing another person. The same idea comes up when she notes the distorting effects of the ego in our experience of the natural world.²⁵ If accurate vision of the natural world is also a moral matter, then vision is moral wherever and whenever it requires the suspension of fantasy. It matters not whether it is vision centred on a moral realm.

²⁵ See especially the discussion of the kestrel at SGC 82/369. (Clifton 2013, 211-212) discusses the passage from OGG.

What should we say about this tension? It looks to rest on a disagreement about the *objects* of moral vision. The first reading holds that moral vision is vision of moral things; the second holds that it is vision which is itself moral. The two views come apart because vision can be moral without it taking something moral as its object. This suggests that if we want to decide between them, we need to consider what Murdoch says about the objects of moral vision.

What is it we see when we see clearly? The objects of attention are, for Murdoch, *individuals*, prime amongst them people with their own distinct histories and idiosyncrasies. This is why ‘the central concept of morality is ‘the individual’ thought of as knowable by love’ (IP 29/323). A good man must know ‘most obviously *the existence of other people* and their claims’ (OGG 57/347, my emphasis). Murdoch’s view, she tells us, is one which ‘connects morality with attention to individuals, human individuals or individual realities of other kinds...’ (IP 36-37/329).²⁶

As an aside, and to make good on a promise from earlier: this view about the objects of attention may explain Murdoch’s use of *visual* language specifically rather than perceptual language more generally. For we ordinarily and with good reason take the objects of vision to be particular individuals, including amongst them other people. This is not true of all forms of perception. Many have thought that the primary objects of audition are sounds such that if we hear, for instance, the children in the garden it is only in virtue of hearing the sounds that they make. Vision is special in that we do not ordinarily think of it as presenting us with objects of visual awareness which are distinct from ordinary individuals and by means of which our awareness of individuals is mediated.²⁷ And that makes it especially appropriate as a model for the kind of attention to individuals which Murdoch means to recommend.²⁸

²⁶ See also the way that recognition of ‘the separateness and differentness of other people’ (OGG 64/353) occasions right conduct and the claim that the word ‘attention’ expresses ‘the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an *individual* reality’ (IP 33/327, my emphasis).

²⁷ See (Martin 2012, 332-334).

²⁸ Especially appropriate but not uniquely so, since touch is also ordinarily understood as taking individuals as objects. Imagine a version of Murdoch which emphasised the way in which we are *held* by the Good. On the absence of tactile metaphors in Murdoch, see

How does this view about the objects of attention bear on Murdoch's use of visual metaphors? The individual realities to which we are related extend beyond anything which might naturally be characterised as constituting a moral realm. This might be thought to undermine the idea that moral vision is vision of *moral* things specifically. But this is too fast. The most plausible form of the first reading holds that Murdoch's use of visual metaphors commits her to our possessing a sensitivity to moral requirements and one can endorse this claim without taking it that moral requirements are a distinctive object of awareness to be contrasted with blades of grass and other people. One might instead hold that our awareness of individuals is properly characterised as a sensitivity to moral requirements in virtue of the *way* in which we are aware of individuals. In particular, one might think that our sensitivity to individuals is to be characterised as sensitivity to the moral domain not because of its objects but because of the concepts at play in our awareness of these objects.

These two things—the objects of awareness and the concepts which structure our awareness—can only be artificially separated for Murdoch. 'Moral concepts', she tells us, 'do not move about *within* a hard world set up by science and logic. They set up, for different purposes, a different world. (IP 27/321). So one might accept that the objects of attention are individuals but hold that attention to such individuals can be characterised, for Murdoch, as a sensitivity to moral requirements because of the concepts we bring to bear in such attention. The idea here would be that moral vision is vision of moral things because of the concepts we use when attending to individual realities.

And once we make this move, the distinction between the two ways of reading Murdoch starts to blur. On the first reading, Murdoch's use of visual metaphors is supposed to draw out our sensitivity to moral requirements and the way such sensitivity occasions knowledge. In contrast, the second reading takes it that Murdoch's use of visual metaphors is supposed to draw out the way in which certain features—the ego, social convention, perhaps others—act as occluders for the kind of clear and accurate vision which occasions action. These views look to disagree on the objects of moral vision. But once

(Cordner 2019) and compare the discussion of Buber's critique of the 'hegemony of sight over the other senses' (Buber 1953, 56) in MGM (461f).

we recognise the role that Murdoch accords to our scheme of concepts in determining our awareness of reality, both can agree that the objects of vision are individual realities, that our awareness of those realities is determined by the scheme of concepts with which we operate, and that the process of finding the right scheme of concepts is a difficult one which requires the overcoming of competing pressures. Moral vision is *moral*, it might be said, because it involves finding the right ways in which to think of the world.

5. Perfect Vision

This would be an irenic point at which to stop. We opened with a distinction between two different ways in which one might understand the term ‘moral vision’: as vision of moral things or as vision which is itself moral. And we have seen a way of understanding Murdoch’s use of visual metaphors which draws on both senses. The point of the visual imagery, on this irenic view, is to draw out the way in which overcoming the barriers to accurate vision requires us to find the right ways to think about other individuals. It is only by finding the right way to think of individual realities that we can come to see our moral requirements and thereby be moved to appropriate action.

But once we push this line of thought to its natural conclusion, the term ‘moral vision’ begins to look misleading. For it is central to both of the readings we have been considering that there is some explanatorily significant distinction between the moral and the non-moral. On the first reading, this is because Murdoch is committed to our having vision of the *moral* domain. And on the second, it is because Murdoch is committed to accurate vision being the result of *moral* effort and imagination. But Murdoch’s commitment to our possessing a sensitive capacity for knowledge need not and should not be cashed out in a way which takes the distinction between the moral and non-moral to carry load-bearing weight. Or so I’ll suggest.

Consider first vision of moral things. We have seen that Murdoch’s metaphors of vision draw out the way in which we are sensitive to individual realities and the ways in which that sensitivity is determined by our scheme of concepts and occasions immediate action. For this view to involve vision of moral things it would have to be the case that the forms of thinking which are

involved in seeing the world aright require the deployment of specifically moral concepts. Is this the case?

The answer is found in Murdoch's account of moral concepts, set out most clearly in 'The Idea of Perfection'. It is a view on which our grasp of concepts changes over time. The possibility of change brings with it, Murdoch thinks, the possibility of improvement such that changes in the grasp of a concept are governed by a regulative ideal of perfection. A perfect scheme of concepts is one which enables a true vision of individual realities. This is why we have to connect 'the idea of the individual and the idea of perfection' (IP 27/321). And since vision under the right scheme of concepts can call forth action (OGG 64/353), the awareness which is enabled by the right ways of thinking results in knowledge which is both theoretical and practical.²⁹

Vision improves as our concepts tends towards perfection. Which concepts are governed by this standard? Although Murdoch introduces the connection between the idea of the individual and the idea of perfection with reference to 'moral concepts' specifically (IP 27/321), she quickly develops the idea in a way which belies the initial restriction:

My view might be put by saying: moral terms must be treated as concrete universals. And if someone at this point were to say, well, why stop at moral concepts, why not claim that all universals are concrete, I would reply, why not indeed? Why not consider red as an ideal end-point, as a concept infinitely to be learned, as an individual object of love? (IP 29/322-3)³⁰

For Murdoch, all concepts aim at perfection, even those of mud, hair, and dirt (SGC 86/372). This is one sense in which her view can be described as a form of Platonism. And it suggests that those perfect concepts which are

²⁹ See especially (IP 10-13/307-8, 23-29/318-323) and the discussions in (Setiya 2013) and (Clarke 2018). Note that nothing in Murdoch excludes the possibility of a deterioration in our scheme of concepts though she thinks the possibility of renewal is always available (VCM 49-50).

³⁰ On concepts as concrete universals, see (Bagnoli 2012), (Merritt 2017, 1852-4) (Clarke 2018, 45-47).

required for accurate vision cannot be restricted to some distinctively moral subset.³¹

Murdoch's account of concept-possession thus implies that the kind of description which allows true vision is not description which is specifically morally inflected. Consider the discussion of the mother and her daughter-in-law. Improvement occurs when the mother begins to think of her daughter-in-law as spontaneous, gay, reasonably youthful (IP 17/313). Seeing things properly requires finding the right way to think about things but these ways of thinking may be as ordinary as you like. It is a mistake to take Murdoch's use of visual metaphors to show that she takes us to have vision of moral things or that we need to possess some set of distinctively moral concepts in order to achieve true vision. There is only and always the difficult task of finding the right concepts with which to think of others and thereby coming to see them aright.³²

Turn now to vision which is itself moral. Murdoch's metaphors of vision draw out the barriers to our sensitivity, barriers which can be overcome only by finding the right ways to think about other individual realities. Does the effort involved in overcoming these barriers make the resulting vision distinctively moral? Murdoch does talk of the *moral* effort and *moral* imagination involved in unselfing (e.g. at IP 36/329) and she characterises the process as one which involves trying to see not only accurately but also *justly* and *lovingly* (IP 22/317). Does this suffice for vision itself to be moral?

Murdoch explicitly connects the effort, love, and justice required for true vision to the infinite perfectibility of the process (IP 22-23/317-8). And it is this ideal of perfection which introduces a dimension of evaluation for visual awareness, one whose ubiquity later forms the basis for Murdoch's ontological

³¹ One might express this as a claim about the ubiquity of moral thought—as in (Diamond 1996, 2010)—but only if we have some independent grip on what the moral amounts to here. (Setiya 2013, 11) points out how Murdoch's claims here go beyond anything standardly understood by Williams's introduction of *thick* concepts (Williams 1985, 140-1).

³² (Setiya 2012, 880) makes this point explicitly. This is another point at which Murdoch's view differs from more recent 'moral perception' views.

proof of the existence of Good (MGM 391f.).³³ The effort and imagination required to dismantle the barriers to vision, and the virtues which someone who makes such effort thereby exemplifies, are to be understood in light of the better vision which they allow rather than the other way around. It is not that moral effort and imagination confer moral status on the resulting vision but that a just and loving gaze confers a standard upon the work which goes into establishing it. Murdoch's view is not one on which the domain of the morally assessable is extended to include inner activities but one on which the ideal of perfection sets a standard of evaluation on the effort involved in achieving it. Vision is not moral but rather ideally perfect.

These points are related. Murdoch's initial philosophical interventions are in the philosophy of mind: on the structure of thinking, the reality of mental phenomena, the connections between mental phenomena and the ways we describe them. Her work in moral philosophy shares this focus: 'The Idea of Perfection' starts by tracing the 'inarticulate moments of modern ethics' back to problems in the 'philosophy of mind' (IP 3/300). We get a proper sense of our lives as moral beings when we get clear on the nature of thinking in general and not moral thinking specifically, at least so long as the latter is supposed to pick out something which is a subset of the former.³⁴ Seeing other individuals properly involves finding the right ways to think about them and that, in turn, requires overcoming our egocentric preoccupations. But these ways of thinking and these states of awareness are not distinctively moral.

Murdoch's use of visual imagery, then, connects two ideas: that we have a scheme of concepts, a background way of making sense of the world, and that we are sensitive to a reality which contains things in it which are picked out by those concepts. This connection is important because the sensitivity which is enabled by a perfect set of concepts is one which allows us a true vision of how things, one which can call us to action. And the sensitivity enabled by a perfect grasp of concepts can be blocked, not least by our own egocentric motivations. The dismantling of these barriers requires a source of alternative energy, one which can help us perfect our ways of thinking and see what is

³³ Cf. (MGM 26, 484, 495) on the ubiquity of evaluation and the chapter on THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT in this volume for consideration of Murdoch's discussion of the ontological proof.

³⁴ See, e.g., (IP 36/329).

there to be seen. Murdoch's visual metaphors are helpfully employed in picking out this family of views because they emphasise the knowledge-conferring nature of this capacity and the knowledge-disabling nature of certain interactors with this capacity. But we misunderstand the picture if we take it to involve vision of moral things, the deployment of specifically moral concepts, or the conferral of a moral status on vision itself. To spell out the picture in these ways is to place too much weight on the distinction between the moral and non-moral and to ignore the way in which all our thinking aims at perfection.³⁵

References

Iris Murdoch

DPR	The Darkness of Practical Reason
F&S	The Fire and the Sun
IP	The Idea of Perfection
M&E	Metaphysics and Ethics
MGM	<i>Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals</i>
OGG	On 'God' and 'Good'
SGC	The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts
T&L	Thinking and Language
VCM	Vision and Choice in Morality

For the three essays (IP, OGG, and SGC) which make up *The Sovereignty of Good*, references are given both to the Routledge Classics edition (London: Routledge, 2001) and to the reprints in *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. Peter Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997). The references to VCM are to the initial publication in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 30 (1):14-58*. The references to MGM are to the Chatto & Windus edition, 1992. All other references are to the papers collected in *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. Peter Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997).

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³⁵ My thanks to Casey Doyle, Cathy Mason, and Silvia Panizza for comments on an earlier version of this essay.

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