Iris Murdoch on Privacy, Perfection, and the Philosophy of Mind

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Iris Murdoch begins 'The Idea of Perfection' by tracing the 'inarticulate moments in modern ethics' back to contemporary thinking in the 'philosophy of mind'. Rather than helping us think through various moral issues, it imposes 'upon us a particular value judgment in the guise of a theory of human nature'. But which philosophy of mind? And how exactly do the problems of modern ethics trace back to that mistaken conception? This essay sets out the picture of mind at issue, its relation to the ethics which Murdoch opposes, and the way Murdoch takes it to be undermined by the considerations offered in her essay. I argue that Murdoch's concern is not primarily the ethical significance of private mental activity but the reality of that which may be seen only in private acts of attention. Murdoch's essay thus poses a challenge to a still dominant picture of mind and reality.

1. Introduction

Iris Murdoch begins 'The Idea of Perfection' by tracing the 'inarticulate moments in modern ethics' back to contemporary thinking in the 'philosophy

of mind' (IP, p.3) Rather than helping us think through various moral issues, it imposes 'upon us a particular value judgment in the guise of a theory of human nature' (IP, p.2). Murdoch thinks this imposition can be seen in a range of authors: Hampshire, Hare, Sartre, Kant, and so on. One aim of 'The Idea of Perfection' is to do better: to offer a 'rival soul-picture' (IP, p.2) which better connects, illuminates, explains, and makes available 'new and fruitful places for reflection' (IP, p.44).

We are not used to thinking of Iris Murdoch as a philosopher of mind. But her earliest papers fall squarely within that domain. Her first paper, 'Thinking and Language', is part of a symposium with Gilbert Ryle and takes, as background, the analysis of mental concepts that Ryle sets out in *The Concept of Mind*. Its topic is the role that inner imagery, metaphor, and speech play in episodes of thinking. Her second paper, 'Nostalgia for the Particular', examines the notion of an inner mental event and its connection with various aspects of meaning. Both attempt to tread a difficult line, between the disdain for the inner which Murdoch found in Ryle and the reification of the inner which Murdoch took to be incompatible with the lessons of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Both papers showcase a careful and serious attempt to get to grips with philosophical problems raised by reflection on the nature and character of mental life.

It is tempting to see these early papers as unconnected with Murdoch's later work in moral philosophy, as if it were only with 'Vision and Choice in Morality' that she settled to the topic which would culminate in the justly more famous later work. But the framing of 'The Idea of Perfection' gives the lie to this suggestion. It both opens and closes with a quote from Stuart Hampshire. 'It is the constructive task of a philosophy of mind', Murdoch quotes Hampshire as saying, 'to provide a set of terms in which ultimate judgments of value can be very clearly stated' (quoted at IP, p.3, p.43). Contemporary philosophy of mind has shirked this task. We need a rival picture (IP, p.9).[1]

[1] Hampshire actually writes of 'the constructive *work* of a philosophy of mind' (1959, p.254, my emphasis) but perhaps Murdoch can be forgiven the more resonant replacement. More interesting is the shift from 'a philosophy of mind' in her first quoting (IP, p.3) to '*the* philosophy of mind' (IP, p.43, my emphasis) in her second. Cora Diamond (2010) and

The decision to make Hampshire the explicit target of 'The Idea of Perfection' is often recognised as a confusing one. It is not that *The Sovereignty of Good* is dedicated to Hampshire—philosophical criticism is compatible with loving friendship and respect. It is that Hampshire looks like a curious target for the picture of morality which Murdoch wants to supplant. That view is more clearly on display in R.M. Hare's *The Language of Morals* (1952) and it is Hare's views which dominated the Oxford discussions which are background Murdoch's thinking. He would seem a more natural foil. Or if not Hare, why not chapter six of A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936) or C.L. Stevenson's *Ethics and Language* (1944)? Either would have provided a clearer and more accessible target for the picture of morality which Murdoch has in sight. Why pick on Hampshire?

Well, Hare is not absent from 'The Idea of Perfection'—he and Ayer receive two passing mentions (p.12, p.34) in lists alongside Hampshire, Ryle, and Sartre as examples of the kind of view which Murdoch will reject. And there is an additional passing mention of Hare—as a contrast to Simone Weil—in three sentences which appear in the original publication of 'The Idea of Perfection' but not the 1970 reprint.[2] But none of these are significant and they serve only to make salient Murdoch's decision to structure the argument of 'The Idea of Perfection' around Hampshire's work. Compare the more substantial role that Hare's views play in the dialectic of 'Vision and Choice in Morality' (e.g., VCM, pp.44–49).

The focus on Hampshire is made more curious once we recognise all that he and Murdoch share. *Thought and Action* (1959) and 'Disposition and Memory' (1962)—the two pieces from which Murdoch quotes in 'The Idea of Perfection'—were not, and were not understood to be, part of the standard ethical fare of mid-twentieth century Oxford. Hampshire's claim about the 'constructive task of a philosophy of mind' comes from the penultimate chapter of *Thought and Action*. It is in that chapter that Hampshire

Kieran Setiya (2013) both emphasise the centrality of Murdoch's views on concept-possession to her broader ethics.

[2] 'When we move from reading R.M. Hare to reading Simone Weil we seem to enter a different world. We can scarcely, as philosophers, be content to say "This is just another kind of stuff." Yet when we try to reflect upon a possible relationship we find ourselves sadly short of instrument' (Murdoch 1964, pp.342–3).

emphasises, among much else, the essentially attributive nature of the term 'good' (pp.223–226); the importance to ethics of the notion of 'the good man' and the virtues (pp.235–238); the essentially contestable nature of moral concepts and the importance of history in determining the character of those concepts (pp.230–231); and the problems of clearly delineating a distinction between description and evaluation (p.227, p.236). All are themes one might find—and many have found—in Murdoch.[3]

Some have thought this the point—that the choice of Hampshire as antagonist is a conscious decision to take the fight to the most sympathetic of her interlocutors, to show that even the most liberal-minded of Oxford philosophers endorses the moral psychology which Murdoch will reject. Murdoch 'needed Hampshire as her object', Justin Broackes suggests, because 'she was wanting to show the defects even of the most scientifically easy-going, forward-looking Wittgensteinianism that the academia of the time could offer' (2012, p.48). If this was Murdoch's reasoning, it comes at a cost—*Thought and Action* is more dense and difficult than anything Hare had to offer and one suspects that Murdoch's thinking would have been more easily brought to view if presented in contrast to a less elusive opponent.

No, the more basic reason for starting with Hampshire is that he is explicit, in a way that Hare, Ayer, and Stevenson are not, that a philosophical account of morality rests on a prior philosophical account of the nature of the human being. Here is a passage from *Thought and Action* which occurs earlier in the chapter from that quoted by Murdoch:

> … the distinguishing of these [human] powers and interests, and the understanding of their relation to each other, have an absolute priority in understanding the whole range of our thought and the structure of our vocabulary. For this reason it is possible to characterise philosophy itself as a search for 'a definition of man', and to interpret the great philosophers of the past as each providing a different account of the powers essential to men. Each philosophy marks differently the domains of reason and sentiment, of thought and perception, of will and desire, and therefore has its own definition of the intellectual, the moral and the aesthetic powers of

[3] Bernard Williams's review of *Thought and Action*—reprinted in (Williams 2014)—gives a sharp and insightful account of the shape of Hampshire's project.

> men. Each philosophy of mind therefore provides a different ground for a stated or implied definition of the essential virtues of men. (1959, p.232)

Hampshire casts his thought here in light of a certain understanding of the attributive use of 'good' but the more general point can be abstracted from that setting. It is that philosophical views about the nature and character of morality are underwritten by a conception of the human being. Murdoch agrees. The aim of 'The Idea of Perfection' is to show how this explains the problems of modern ethics. Murdoch needs Hampshire because she needs to show that modern ethics presupposes a philosophy of mind.

But which philosophy of mind? And how exactly do the problems of modern ethics trace back to that mistaken conception? This is our topic in this essay. Murdoch's claim is not just that the underlying philosophy of mind is false—that would count against any view which assumed it, whether in ethics or elsewhere. Her claim is that the problems of modern ethics are to be explained by a mistaken view in the philosophy of mind. That is to say, there is an inadequate philosophy of mind and there are problems in modern ethics which arise because of that inadequate philosophy of mind. Both claims need explication if we are to understand Murdoch's project.

2. Genetic Analysis

Let us start with the human being. Hampshire presupposes a picture of man, Murdoch tells us, which 'is to be found more or less explicitly lurking behind much that is written nowadays on the subject of moral philosophy and indeed also of politics'—a man who is 'the hero of almost every contemporary novel' (p.7). This picture of man involves a 'theory of the 'inner life'' (p.9), one on which 'the inner must be thought of as parasitic on the outer' (p.10). This theory of the inner life is supported by the claim that 'mental concepts must be analysed genetically' (p.9). It is the genetic analysis of mental concepts which is the target of Murdoch's essay.

What is the connection to ethics? Murdoch claims that it is because mental concepts are analysed genetically that '[m]etaphors of movement and not vision seem obviously appropriate' for our ethical thinking (p.15). The genetic

analysis of mental concepts makes it '*logically* impossible to take up an idle contemplative attitude to the good' (p.15). The succeeding parts of 'The Idea of Perfection' aim to show that the genetic analysis of mental concepts is undermined by two distinct lines of thought—one which focuses on what we are inclined to say about a particular case involving a mother and her daughter-in-law (pp.16–24), the other which focuses on the perfectibility of moral concepts (pp.27–32).

This gives us the following broad structure for Murdoch's argument: modern ethics assumes a theory of the inner life; that theory of the inner life is supported by a genetic analysis of mental concepts; but the genetic analysis of mental concepts cannot account for i.) what we are inclined to say about a particular case involving a mother and her daughter-in-law, and ii.) the perfectibility of moral concepts. These considerations undermine the genetic analysis of mental concepts and, with it, the reasons for endorsing the theory of inner life assumed by modern ethics. We thus open up space for an alternative picture of man and, correspondingly, an alternative picture of ethics—one which emphasises metaphors of vision, attention, and reality.[4]

This broad sketch raises a number of questions. Three are salient. First, what is the genetic analysis of concepts presupposed by Hampshire's picture of man? Second, what is the relation between this genetic analysis and the account of ethics which Murdoch opposes? Finally, how do the considerations adduced by Murdoch in the main part of her essay undermine the genetic analysis? A proper understanding of Murdoch's essay requires satisfactory answers to each of these questions. We start with the first.

Let us begin with Murdoch's terminology. First, 'genetic'. This carries no connotation of the biological. It is rather that which relates to origin or development. A genetic analysis or explanation is thus one which turns on the origin or development of the phenomenon in question. Hume's account of the relation between ideas and impressions is an example. A genetic analysis

[4] This alternative picture is developed across the remaining essays which make up *The Sovereignty of Good*. See, among much else, OGG, pp.56–58, SGC, p.75, p.88, and especially the concluding section from p.92f.

of mental concepts is one which analyses mental concepts in terms of their history or context of acquisition (see, e.g. IP, pp.25–26).

Second, 'analysis' and 'explanation'. Murdoch moves freely between object-level and metalinguistic formulations of her claims: thus 'the genetic analysis of mental concepts' (p.23) versus 'the behaviourist view with its genetic explanation of mental phenomena' (p.27). This was not unusual for the Oxford of the time. P.F. Strawson's *Individuals* (1959), for instance, is often presented as a paradigm of conceptual analysis given its intent to 'describe the actual structure of our *thought* about the world' (p.9, my emphasis). But Strawson is equally content to express his claims in object-level formulations, often within the same paragraph as the metalinguistic formulations. Thus, '[t]he concept of a person is not to be analysed as that of an animated body or of an embodied anima… A person is not an embodied ego, but an ego might be a disembodied person…' (Strawson 1959, p.103). The best explanation of this, it seems to me, is that Oxford philosophers of the time did not see a large gap between claims about the nature of concepts and claims about the nature of that which the concepts pick out—at least for a certain set of concepts. I'll largely follow Murdoch in this laxity but will occasionally note where more fastidious hands may wish to draw distinctions.

Murdoch takes the terminology of a genetic analysis of mental concepts from Hampshire's 'Disposition and Memory', quoting his claim that 'it is characteristic of mental, as opposed to physical, concepts that the conditions of their application can only be understood if they are analysed genetically' (IP, p.6, quoting Hampshire 1962, p.81). Hampshire continues his sentence, 'that is, we need to trace the order in which their use is learnt in the history of any individual, beginning with the primitive concepts of sensation, desire and behaviour, concepts that are applicable also to creatures who are not potential language-users, and showing the use of the more distinctively mental concepts as developing from them in successive stages of interiorization' (1962, p.81).

'Disposition and Memory' is a rich and difficult paper. Its main concern is the notion of a mental disposition and its relation to inhibition in the context of Freud's account of the unconscious. The claim that mental, as opposed to physical, concepts are to be analysed genetically is presented as part of a case

for thinking that the acquisition of mental concepts not only enlarges the domain of objects to which mental states can be directed but also the range of mental phenomena a subject can undergo. (Consider 'embarrassment rather than fear, shame rather than guilt' (1962, p.81)). The notion of a genetic analysis for Hampshire here is primarily in use when we explain the emergence of character traits in terms of earlier and more basic mental dispositions of the sort that can be present in non-language-using animals.

Murdoch's use is wider. In broad terms, she takes it to be the view on which the meaning of mental concepts is fixed by their context of acquisition. This in itself is compatible with a wide range of views. But Murdoch takes her opponents to make an additional assumption: that mental concepts are acquired in an essentially *public* context. (See, e.g., the references to 'public structure', 'procedures in public situations', 'public schemata', all from IP, p.11). It is this publicity constraint which explains why Murdoch's opponents take the inner to be parasitic on the outer—it is because the public resources which fix the meaning of mental concepts are necessarily accessible to others. A genetic analysis of mental concepts is thus one on which mental concepts have their meaning fixed in terms of something which is publicly accessible.[5]

Which aspects of the public context fix the meaning of mental concepts? Murdoch focuses on 'some typical outward behaviour pattern' (IP, p.13) and links a genetic analysis with a behaviourist understanding of concepts (e.g., at IP, p.12–13). The essay as a whole thus sets itself against what Murdoch calls, with tongue surely partly in cheek, 'the existentialist-behaviourist view' (IP, p.19), and this makes it tempting to equate the genetic analysis of mental concepts with a behaviourist view on which the meaning of mental concepts is given by certain behavioural dispositions—or, to descend to the object-language, on which mental states just are behavioural dispositions of a certain sort. Add to this Murdoch's opposition to Ryle's behaviourist analysis in 'Thinking and Language' and one can see why it is tempting to think that behaviourism is the real problem and the genetic analysis problematic insofar as it motivates behaviourism.[6]

[5] See (Setiya 2013, pp.8–9) for a similar account.
[6] See, e.g., (Antonaccio 2000, p.75); cf. T&L, p.30f, NP, pp.245–7.

But we should tread carefully. There are a range of ways of connecting mental concepts with behaviour and a range of ways of understanding the notion of behaviour so invoked—compare Carnap's examples of high-pulse rate and rate of breathing (Carnap 1932, p.172) with Ryle's shuddering and dwelling in the imagination on possible disasters (Ryle 1949, p.129). We could simply define 'behaviour' as that publicly accessible thing which fixes the meaning of mental concepts and then take behaviourism, so understood, to be Murdoch's target. But we would need to be explicit that this is compatible with a range of views on the nature of behaviour.[7]

Indeed, and despite her initial assimilation of a genetic analysis with behaviourism, Murdoch herself recognises (if only obliquely and in passing) that there are a range of non-behaviourist views which also accept a publicity constraint on the meaning of mental concepts: she mentions those on which the meanings of mental concepts are fixed 'via the public meaning of the symbolism used in thinking'—her example is A.J. Ayer's *Thinking and Meaning* (1947)—and those on which they are fixed 'via context rather than the general sense of the thought via symbols' (IP, p.20). Neither of these need make reference to patterns of outward behaviour so neither would comfortably be described as forms of behaviourism. But they fall within her target.

We should, then, understand the genetic analysis of mental concepts primarily in terms of its connection to the wider notion of publicity rather than behaviour more specifically. But what notion of publicity is in play? Hampshire connects it to the idea of a point of view or perspective (1959, p.162), in a passage which Murdoch quotes (IP, p.5), and these ideas give us a rough way to fix the notion. Let something be private if and only if it is accessible only from a particular point of view. Then something will be public if it is accessible independently of any particular point of view. And the limiting case of privacy will be something which is accessible only from a point of view which can be occupied by one person alone. So understood, the ideas of privacy and publicity are only as well-defined as that of a point of view. But we need not treat these as reductive analyses. Rather, they situate

[7] See (Hornsby 1986) and (Crawford 2013) on the importance of distinguishing different notions of behaviour.

the notions of the public and private within a recognisable tradition in the philosophy of mind which elucidates the distinctiveness of mentality in terms of its perspectival nature. The mental is private because it is accessible only from a particular point of view.[8]

The argument in support of a genetic analysis, Murdoch tells us, 'is best understood as a special case of a yet more general and by now very familiar argument about the status of what is 'private" (p.10). Indeed, it is best understood as an instance of a yet more general argument which holds that '[t]he structure of the concept is its *public* structure, which is established by coinciding procedures in public situations' (IP, p.11, my emphasis, cf. p.14). The picture of man which Murdoch rejects is one which takes there to be a publicity constraint on the meaning of mental concepts.

3. Private Acts

This answers our first question about the genetic analysis of mental concepts. We turn now to the second and third. How does the genetic analysis relate to the account of ethics which Murdoch opposes? And how do the considerations in the main body of Murdoch's essay—that which we are inclined to say about the case of the mother and her daughter-in-law and the perfectibility of moral concepts—show its falsity? I have suggested that a genetic analysis is of importance, for Murdoch, because it takes the meaning of mental concepts to be fixed by the publicly accessible context of acquisition. Murdoch claims that this constrains our space of options in ethical thinking by making '[m]etaphors of movement and not vision seem obviously appropriate' (p.15) and making it '*logically* impossible to take up an idle contemplative attitude to the good' (p.15). How should we understand this connection?

We have seen that the genetic analysis of mental concepts places a publicity constraint on the meaning of mental concepts. This looks to entail the impossibility of purely private mental acts. For if mental concepts must be accessible independently of any particular point of view, then there are no

[8] See (Nagel 1974, 1986) for an influential characterisation of the mental in terms of perspective; (Moore 1997) carefully regiments the notion of a point of view and discusses its relevance for debates about subjectivity and objectivity.

mental concepts which can be grasped only from some particular point of view. Or, to switch to the object-language, if mental states are individuated in terms of publicly accessible structures, there are no mental objects which can be grasped only from some particular point of view. Does this have implications for our ethical theorising?

It does if it supports an account of ethics on which ethical significance is confined to *public* acts—our 'outward dealings with other men' (IP, p.8), as Murdoch puts it. The genetic analysis is ethically problematic on this view since it denies the existence of mental activities which play a central role in our ethical lives: private mental activities such as looking, repenting, or deciding. The example of the mother and daughter-in-law is then broadly an existence proof: it demonstrates the existence of a private mental act which has ethical significance. This is shown by what we are inclined to say about the mother: that she has 'engaged in an internal struggle' (IP, p.22), that 'something introspectable… has occurred, however hazy this may be…' (IP, p.19). The genetic analysis is forced to deny these claims or, at least, to reinterpret them such that they pick out mental activities which have some connection to the public. And if it cannot do that, then we have a counterexample to the publicity constraint on mental concepts and thus reason to reject the genetic analysis of mental concepts in favour of a picture of man in which the ethical significance of private activity can be found.[9]

Call this the *Subject-Centred* reading of Murdoch's argument. It holds that the problematic philosophy of mind is one which places a publicity constraint on mental concepts. And the problems of modern ethics trace back to this philosophy of mind because the philosophy of mind denies the existence of private mental activity—and thus cannot allow the existence of ethically significant private acts. The example of the mother and daughter-in-law shows that there can be such private acts. So the publicity constraint on mental concepts has to be rejected and Murdoch's rival soul-picture given space.

[9] (Antonaccio 2000, pp.75–84) provides a prominent reading of Murdoch along these lines; (Wiseman 2020) is a recent example.

This is an attractive reading of Murdoch's argument and it captures much of the discussion of privacy in the initial presentation of the case of the mother and her daughter-in-law (particularly from pp.18–21). Murdoch notes that her opponents are forced to say that 'M's *private* thoughts will be unimportant and morally irrelevant' (IP, p.18, my emphasis). And the discussion of decision-making on pp.20–21 turns on considerations about whether there can be such a thing as a decision without any connection to an 'outward alteration in structure' (IP, p.20). This can make it seem like what is at issue is the status of private activity whose nature is accessible only from within a specific point of view. And it is not wrong, as far it goes. But if we take this to exhaust Murdoch's rejection of the genetic analysis, we miss the force of her discussion. Or so I will argue.

First, two preliminary points about Murdoch's discussion. Consider first the example of the mother and daughter-in-law. On the reading just outlined, it shows the existence of a purely private mental act. But if this exhausted its role, then it is not clear that it tells against anything but the most simplistic form of behaviourism. As Murdoch herself note, behaviourists had already been careful to allow the compatibility of such inner activity with a publicity constraint on mental concepts. Ryle and Carnap both insisted on the dispositional nature of ascriptions of mental concepts, in effect allowing that there could be inner mental activity whose existence was secured only by the possibility of such activity showing up in public patterns of behaviour. Murdoch recognises that this is an option, that one could 'of course give a *hypothetical* status' to the mother's inner life (IP, p.21)—the emphasis nicely capturing a certain amount of scepticism. And she thinks this falsifies the character of the private reflection, in part because she thinks that the hypothetical proposition cannot be known to be true, even by the mother (IP, p.21). But Murdoch doesn't give grounds for this denial of knowledge and the behaviourist need not accept that the metaphysical dependence of inner activity on outer behaviour entails an equivalent epistemological dependence. Hampshire's account of the knowledge one has as an agent of mental activity precisely breaks any such link (1959, p.90f).

Second, and relatedly, if the aim of the argument is simply to show the existence of private mental activity, then Hampshire is again a curious target. Far better to focus on Ryle. His account of mental activity in *The Concept of*

Mind, at least on one standard reading of that material, looks committed to the denial of private mental acts and it was this account which Murdoch took as target in 'Thinking and Language' (p.30f.; cf. NP, pp.245–7). But 'The Idea of Perfection' takes Hampshire as stalking horse. And Hampshire shares Murdoch's opposition to Ryle. His review of *The Concept of Mind*, for example, is fiercely critical of Ryle's analysis of mental concepts.[10] And in both *Thought and Action* and 'Disposition and Memory', Hampshire is careful to allow the possibility of mental events which can be disconnected from outward behaviour. 'The pure case of mere inclination, as a state of consciousness, with every natural expression of it suppressed, certainly exists…' (1962, p.79). If the aim was to show only the existence of private mental acts, Murdoch would have done better to focus her fire on the more explicit denial of private activity in *The Concept of Mind*.[11]

These are minor considerations. More serious are two points about the structure of Murdoch's argument. On the view we are considering, the problems of modern ethics trace back to a mistaken philosophy of mind because the philosophy of mind assumes a publicity constraint on mental concepts and thus cannot allow the existence, and a fortiori the ethical significance of, private mental activity. But while this reading has a good story to tell about the role that the case of the mother and daughter-in-law plays in rejecting the genetic analysis of mental concepts, it is less clear how it handles the perfectibility of moral concepts. This is the material which comes to the fore in the rest of 'The Idea of Perfection' and Murdoch suggests that it is here we find the fundamental problems with a genetic analysis. One can read this later material as bearing on the existence of private mental activity if one takes the perfectibility of moral concepts to require a deepening (IP, p.20) and if one thinks that when a concept is deepened, its new meaning must go beyond that which was grasped in its initial public acquisition (see especially the paragraph at IP, p.20 for material in this vein). But, again, no sophisticated behaviourist will insist that the initial moment of acquisition *exhausts* the

[10] (Hampshire 1950)

[11] Maria Antonaccio's reconstruction of Murdoch's argument draws both on the essays published in *The Sovereignty of Good* and the earlier papers; see her (2000, pp.77–78) and the methodological reflections at (2000, pp.20–24). One way to take the suggestion of this essay is that 'The Idea of Perfection' builds on the argument of the earlier papers but in a way that shifts and extends their reach.

meaning of a mental concept and no reason has been provided for thinking that concepts which are deepened in response to experiences which go beyond the initial acquisition must thereby count as private. My experience of parenting changes the genesis of my conception of love as much as it changes its content.[12]

The second and more significant problem concerns the role that the example of the mother and daughter-in-law plays in Murdoch's discussion. According to the view under consideration, the point of this example is to isolate for us an example of ethically significant private activity. But it does not matter, on this reading, that the private activity at issue is one of *looking* at another. This is striking. The point would work just as well with the example of repentance, which Murdoch almost—but only almost!—uses as her example (IP, p.16). Mental activity such as deciding and repenting will count as private, according to the account of privacy set out above, to the extent that someone's decision and repentance are accessible only from her own point of view. The publicity constraint on mental concepts claims that there can be no such private activity and the dispute between Murdoch and her opponents thus turns on whether it is plausible that these mental activities can be separated from any public structure (see IP, pp.12–13 on decision and p.16 on repentance). This is all that is at issue.[13]

But this mischaracterises Murdoch's concerns. The example of the mother and daughter-in-law is important to the overall argument of *The Sovereignty of Good* not because it brings into focus some mental activity of the mother which is ethically significant but because it brings into focus the character of *the object of the mother's mental activity*—namely, the daughter-in-law, in all her rumbustious, undignified, and unsophisticated glory. If Murdoch's sole objection to the genetic analysis were that it denied the existence of private mental activity, then repenting or deciding would do just as well for making the point. But it is not the ethical significance of privately looking which is at issue for Murdoch. Rather, it is the ethical reality of that which the mother,

[12] (Wiseman 2020, p.228) and (Mason 2022 p.1130) both seem to assume that concepts which are initially learned in a public context and later change in response to differential experiences will thereby count as private.

[13] (Wiseman 2020) uses the example of repentance as if it made the same point as the case of looking justly and lovingly.

perhaps privately, sees. This insight is distorted if one focuses only on the mother's private mental activity and its ethical significance.[14]

Let me bring these thoughts together. We have seen that the genetic analysis of mental concepts places a publicity constraint on the meaning of mental concepts. According to the reading sketched in this section, the problems of modern ethics trace back to this genetic analysis because it forces our ethical theories to deny the existence of ethically significant private mental activity. And that there is such activity is demonstrated by the example of the mother and daughter-in-law. I've suggested that this reading diminishes the force of Murdoch's discussion: it does not give a plausible reading of the considerations about the perfectibility of moral concepts which Murdoch wields against the genetic analysis of mental concepts and it mischaracterises the significance of Murdoch's discussion of the mother and daughter-in-law. Murdoch's concern is not the status of the mother's activity of privately looking but the reality of what the mother privately sees.

4. Private Objects

How, then, should we understand the connection between the genetic analysis of mental concepts and the account of ethics which Murdoch opposes? And how do the considerations about the case of the mother and her daughter-in-law and the perfectibility of moral concepts show the falsity of the genetic analysis?

We can get a sense of the deeper issues at play by attending to the paragraph where Murdoch sums up the import of the discussion of the mother and daughter-in-law (IP, pp.22–23). Murdoch here does three things. She emphasises the object of the mother's attention and the attempt to see it justly or lovingly; she connects this to 'something progressive, something infinitely perfectible', marking the transition to the considerations about the perfectibility of moral concepts which feature in the next phase of Murdoch's discussion; and she says that 'it is just the presence of this idea'—that is, the idea of progress—'which demands an analysis of mental concepts which is

[14] Justin Broackes (2012, p.47) and Kieran Setiya (2013, p.9) both rightly emphasises this point.

different from the genetic one' (IP, 23). One important aspect of this paragraph is the way it unifies the two considerations which Murdoch brings to bear against the genetic analysis of mental concept: both involve the idea of progress and it is the inability of the genetic analysis to make sense of this idea which shows the fundamental problem with the failing philosophy of mind. Hence the title of the essay—the idea of *perfection*.

Why does the idea of progress demand the rejection of the genetic analysis of mental concepts? Murdoch continues in what she describes as a change of key:

> Let us consider for a moment the apparently so plausible idea of identity as dependent upon observers and rules, an idea which leads on directly to the genetic analysis of mental concepts. This is really red if several people agree about the description, indeed this is what being really red means. He really decided, roughly, if people agree that he kept the rules of the concept 'decide'. To decide means to keep these rules and the agent is not the only judge. Actions are 'moving things about in the public world', and what these movements are objective observers are actually and potentially at hand to decide. (IP, p.23)

Murdoch here traces the publicity constraint to an apparently plausible claim about the dependence of identity on observers and rules. 'Identity' is to be understood as that which makes something what it is—what it *really* is, as Murdoch puts it later in the paragraph. The apparently so plausible claim is thus a claim about the conditions which have to be in place for something to be part of reality: something is real only if it is independent from any special point of view and thus potentially accessible to other observers. Call this the *impersonal conception of reality*.

The impersonal conception of reality links closely to the notions of publicity and privacy set out in the previous section. For if something is real just in case it is independent of any special point of view, and if something is private if and only if it is accessible only from a particular point of view, then it will follow that there are no private objects. This explains the publicity constraint on mental concepts, exactly as Murdoch suggests ('an idea which leads directly on…'). It can now be seen as a way of ensuring the reality of the mental. For if one endorses the impersonal conception of reality and yet holds onto the

idea that the mental is real, then there must be a sense in which mentality is independent of any special point of view. A publicity constraint on mental concepts secures such independence: mental phenomena are to be characterised in terms of public material which is, in principle, independent of any particular point of view.[15]

Say that this is right, that the genetic analysis of mental concepts is to be understood as motivated by an impersonal conception of reality. Why would that give rise to the problems of modern ethics? The subject-centred reading sketched in the previous section suggested an answer: the impersonal conception of reality cannot allow the existence of private mental activity and this is a problem for ethics insofar as it thus ignores the reality of ethically significant private mental activity. I noted above that it does not matter to this reading that Murdoch's example is one of *looking*. Her point could just as well be made, as it almost was, by appeal to repenting or deciding. But these are not the activities that she chooses to make her point. And *looking* raises an additional layer of privacy not obviously present in repenting and deciding. For looking is a mental act which straightforwardly takes an object. And Murdoch's discussion of the privacy of the act of looking is a precursor to a discussion of the privacy of that which the mother sees. It is in virtue of looking at the daughter-in-law with love and justice that the mother comes to see something which may, for all that has been said so far, be perceptible only from a particular point of view. This is why Murdoch appeals to the metaphor of *vision* when looking for that which is 'irresistibly suggested to anyone who, without prejudice, wishes to describe the situation' (IP, p.22). Murdoch wants us to feel the pull of the thought that there is something in the daughter-in-law which is perceptible to someone who is looking at her in justice and with love. The privacy of the mental activity gives way to a focus on the potential privacy of its object.

So much for the case of the mother and the daughter-in-law. What about the perfectibility of moral concepts? The argument thus far has motivated the idea that there are aspects of reality which show up from a particular point of view. But this doesn't show that the impersonal conception of reality is false. For

[15] See (Williams 1978, p.64) and (Nagel 1986) for influential discussions of realism and objectivity which emphasise independence from a particular point of view.

perhaps that which the mother finds in the daughter-in-law can be redescribed in terms unproblematically available independently of the particularities of the mother's perspective. The discussion of psychoanalysis at IP, pp.26–27 gives one such redescription—the mother is not seeing the daughter properly in terms which are dependent on a particular perspective; she is re-enacting buried psychic forces which are in principle comprehensible to and in practice comprehended by someone who does not share the mother's particular perspective on her daughter-in-law. If the impersonal conception of reality is to be shown false, we need grounds to think that there are aspects of reality which are accessible *only* from a particular point of view.

This is the import of the perfectibility of moral concepts. It enters as a way of characterising the concepts which the mother uses in attending to her daughter-in-law. That is, it enters as a characterisation of the objects which are picked out in an episode of private mental activity. This is important because it does not follow from the fact that a private mental activity has an object that its object is only accessible from a particular point of view. It might be, for all that the argument has said so far, that the mother's episode of private mental activity picks out aspects of the daughter-in-law which are equally accessible from alternative points of view. Perhaps spontaneity, gayness, and youth can be characterised purely descriptively and picked up by someone who does not share the mother's loving concern. Murdoch thinks this will not do. It will not do, she says, because the mother's activity is 'essentially something progressive, something infinitely perfectible' (IP, 23). The idea of progress, the idea of perfection itself, is supposed to entail that the objects which show up in private mental activity are accessible only from a particular point of view. This is how it links the two aspects of discussion and why it isolates the real problem with the genetic analysis.

Why should the idea of perfection ensure the privacy of the object of mental activity? The term has Kantian resonances which are presumably deliberate. Kant tells us that the transcendental ideas of soul, world, and God go beyond what can be given in experience. But he does not think that this leaves them without purpose:

> On the contrary, however, they have an excellent and indispensably necessary regulative use, namely that of directing the understanding

> to a certain goal respecting which the lines of direction of all its rules converge at one point, which, although it is only an idea… nonetheless still serves to obtain for these concepts the greatest unity alongside the greatest extension. (*CPR*, A644/B672)

The transcendental ideas are not given in experience. But they nevertheless serve a regulatory role in guiding the application of our concepts. Murdoch's thought is similar: the idea of perfection is not given in experience but we must use it as a regulative ideal guiding our application of concepts.[16]

This is relevant for the activity of looking because Murdoch takes vision to involve a conceptual scheme: our 'total vision of life' as she puts it in 'Vision and Choice in Morality' (VCM, p.39) is precisely a *vision* of life which affects how we see the world.[17] Thus the fact that we make use of concepts which are guided by an ideal of perfection shows that the concepts which are so guided are not capable of codification in public rules and structure. Infinite perfectibility, and thus any concept which is guided by it as a regulative idea, outruns codification in public structure. And although she introduces the idea with reference to moral concepts, it soon extends to take in even 'red as an ideal end-point, as a concept infinitely to be learned, as an individual object of love' (IP, p.29; cf. the reference to mud, dirt, and hair at SGC, p.86). That is to say, all the concepts which structure the private mental activity of looking are guided by the regulative ideal of perfection and it is this, Murdoch thinks, which ensures that the items which show up from the mother's point of view are not capable of being characterised independently of it. Private activity gives way to private object.

Here, then, is the picture. Call it the *Object-Centred* reading. Say that there are private mental activities which take an object. Then there are objects which show up from particular points of view. And say that those objects are to be characterised in ways which are infinitely perfectible—which is to say, in ways which cannot be codified in advance. Then there are objects which are accessible only from a particular point of view. The object of private mental activity thus cannot be secured in an impersonal conception of reality

[16] See (Setiya 2013, p.12) for a similar line of thought drawing on a Platonic theory of concepts.
[17] See (Gomes 2022, p.144) on these connections.

through an impersonal account of the mental activity in which it shows up. And it cannot be secured in an impersonal conception of reality through an impersonal account of the concepts which are used to characterise it. The perfectibility of moral concepts together with the case of the mother and daughter-in-law constitute a case for the existence of aspects of reality which show up only from a particular point of view.

It remains true, on this reading, that there is private, mental activity. And it remains true that such activity has a particular character—it is both difficult and never complete, as Murdoch insists (IP, p.41). But that difficulty is to be understood primarily in terms of the barriers to accurate vision. Seeing is difficult because fantasy, prejudice, anxiety, and neurosis stop us from apprehending things as really are. Once we reject the impersonal conception of reality, we may take what we say at face value and allow that the mother sees the daughter-in-law as she really is, even though that aspect of reality is only comprehensible from a particular perspective. That is, we may take seriously the thought that there are aspects of the world—aspects of daughters-in-law—which show up only from the perspective of someone who looks at them with love and justice. These aspects of the world may be private, in virtue of being accessible only from a particular point of view, but they are no less real for all that. So it is not just that we distort the nature of moral activity if we do not allow the existence of private, mental activity. We distort the nature of reality itself. And any distortion in the former is to be understood primarily in terms of distortion to the latter.[18]

Murdoch's target, then, is a philosophy of mind which endorses a publicity constraint on mental concepts. This constraint entails that there are no private mental acts. It thus has ethical implications, insofar as it forces us to adopt ethical theories on which ethical significance is confined to public activity. But the publicity constraint arises as an implication of a deeper commitment to an impersonal conception of reality: one on which reality is necessarily public. This entails not just the dismissal of purely private mental activity but also the dismissal of that which shows up only in purely private mental activity—including such things as a daughter-in-law's youthful delight. The

[18] On the barriers to accurate vision, see (Gomes 2022, §4). Cf. OGG p.51, p.57; SGC p.82. Thanks to Bridget Clarke for suggesting this way of putting the contrast.

impersonal conception of reality is a problem not primarily because of what it precludes us from saying about the mother but because of what it precludes us from saying about the daughter-in-law: that she is as the mother, and only the mother, finds her to be. We need a picture of the human being which allows us to find more in reality than can be captured in impersonal terms.

At the heart of 'The Idea of Perfection', Murdoch describes her case as connecting two ideas: the idea of the individual and the idea of perfection (IP, p.27). We can see now why she should do so. The individual is important not as the subject of private mental activity but as its object; and the idea of perfection is important as a regulative ideal under which the individual is viewed. Once we recognise the role that perfection plays in our vision of another, we will come to see the way in which aspects of the individual show up only from particular points of view. It is the inability to allow private objects of private mental activities which is the real failing of Hampshire's picture of man.

5. Private Realities

'It is the constructive task of a philosophy of mind to provide a set of terms in which ultimate judgments of value can be very clearly stated'. So Hampshire (almost) says in *Thought and Action*.[19] And Murdoch agrees. The philosophy of mind she finds in Hampshire and others is one which places a publicity constraint on mental concepts in light of commitment to an impersonal conception of reality. This publicity constraint rules out the existence of private mental activity. For some, this is its failing: that, in virtue of denying the existence of private mental activity, Hampshire, Hare, and others are unable to acknowledge the kind of ethically significant private mental activity which takes place in the case of the mother and daughter-in-law. I've suggested that this undersells Murdoch's challenge. What is at issue is not the ethical significance of private mental activity but the reality of that which the private mental activity is directed towards. Murdoch's aim is to show that there are aspects of reality which are only accessible from a particular point of view. And it is this which requires the rejection of an

[19] See fn.1 above.

impersonal conception of reality and, with it, the genetic analysis of mental concepts.

I've motivated this understanding of Murdoch purely on textual grounds. It also makes her argument more interesting. Behaviourist accounts of mental concepts have long faded from the philosophical scene and if the role of the attentive mother is simply to show their falsity—well, then add her to the super-spartans, martian marionettes, and blockheads which populate philosophy of mind reading lists.[20] No, behaviourism may have faded but the assumption that reality is impersonal remains. Murdoch sees that this conception of reality requires an impersonal conception of human beings—that is, an account of the nature of persons which fits them and their activities into a world characterised without reference to some particular point of view. Behaviourism gives us such an account. But so do the reductionist, naturalist accounts of the mind which dominate contemporary philosophical thinking. Murdoch's claim is that our ethical theories are constrained when forced to operate within the boundaries enforced by these accounts of the human being—and if this is an insight, it is one which still has bite.

A final thought. Some of Murdoch's readers will already be hostile to the impersonal conception of reality. So it is worth noting how Murdoch's account of its distorting effects differs from a common way of thinking about its influence on ethics. The impersonal conception of reality insists that something is real if and only if it is independent from any special point of view. This constrains our philosophy of mind on the assumption that the mind is real. For we then have to find a place for the mind in a world characterised without reference to some particular point of view. And it constrains our ethical theories on the assumption that the subject matter of ethics is real. For then, given the impersonal conception of reality, ethics too must be situated within a world characterised without reference to some particular point of view. J.L. Mackie would later argue that this cannot be done, and that the subject matter of ethics is thus illusory.[21] Murdoch's

[20] In (Putnam 1965), (Peacocke 1983), and (Block 1981) respectively.

[21] At least in the first chapter of *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977)—the later chapters suggest, contrary to Mackie's official pronouncements, a way to secure some kind of reality for the subject matter of ethics, albeit one which rests more on convention than one might

targets—at least Hare and Stevenson, perhaps also Sartre—instead attempt to reconcile the subject matter of ethics with an impersonal conception of reality by equating moral judgements with something unproblematically found within the impersonal conception of reality, 'something much more comprehensible, such as persuasions or commands or rules' (IP, p.4).

This is an orthodox way of thinking about the implications of the impersonal conception of reality: it distorts our philosophical theorising by setting a standard to which mentality and morality must be accommodated. We can meet this standard by accepting a genetic analysis of mental concepts and by accepting an ethical theory on which moral judgements are to be identified with persuasions, commands, or rules. Or we can meet it by reducing mentality and morality to something which features in an impersonal description of the world. In either case, the impersonal conception sets the standard, and ordinary thinking is forced to adjust.

This is a familiar way of thinking about the metaphysics of morals. But it is not Murdoch. Her argument in 'The Idea of Perfection' is that the mistakes in modern ethics are to be traced back to a mistaken philosophy of mind. And sourcing both the mistakes of the philosophy of mind and the mistakes of ethics in an impersonal conception of reality does not yet do that. No, Murdoch's claim is that an impersonal conception of mentality *itself* implicates a mistaken view of ethics. And that claim, I've suggested, is motivated by a thought about what shows up from the point of view of a person. Murdoch's problem is not that of fitting mind and morals into an impersonal conception of the world. It is the problem of making sense of one person looking at another, trying to see her aright.[22]

otherwise have thought. See David Wiggins's insightful discussion of Mackie in (Wiggins 2006, p.325f.).

[22] My thanks to Bridget Clarke and Kieran Setiya for comments on an earlier version of this essay. Thanks also to audiences in Paris, Oxford, and Vanderbilt for comments and discussion.

References

Iris Murdoch

IP	The Idea of Perfection
NP	Nostalgia for the Particular
OGG	On 'God' and 'Good'
SGC	The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts
T&L	Thinking and Language
VCM	Vision and Choice in Morality

Page references for the three essays (IP, OGG, and SGC) which make up *The Sovereignty of Good*, are given to the Routledge Classics edition (London: Routledge, 2001). The initial version of 'The Idea of Perfection' is published in *The Yale Review* LIII (3), 1964. The references to T&L, NP, and VCM are to the initial publications in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 25: 25–82 (T&L), *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 52: 43–260 (NP), and *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 30 (1):14–58 (VCM).

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