

The Importance of Attention in Morality

An Exploration of Iris Murdoch's Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of attention in morality as presented by Iris Murdoch. The aim is to offer a clear and detailed understanding of Murdoch's concept of attention, its metaphysical presuppositions and its implications for morality, and, if Murdoch's view as developed here is found to be plausible, to suggest how attention can be considered to play an important role in morality. The moral concept of attention presented in this work involves particular epistemic attitudes and faculties that are meant to enable the subject to apprehend moral reality and thus achieve correct moral understanding and moral responses.

The thesis is divided into three parts. The first part (Chapters 1 and 2), clarifies Murdoch's metaphysical picture on which the idea of attention is grounded. The metaphysics involves a dual commitment to value as both existing in reality and as a transcendental condition. While the two ideas appear incompatible, I suggest a framework against which Murdoch's claim that an evaluative consciousness apprehends a value external to itself might be understood. The second part introduces Murdoch's moral psychology, and explores how the faculties, attitudes and character traits related to attention are involved in moral understanding (Chapters 3 and 4). The two parts come together in Chapter 5, which focuses on how the exercise of attention can be understood as enabling moral perception. The last part (Chapters 6 and 7) continues the moral psychological exploration of attention, by focusing on the self, viewed both as interference and as indispensable means in attaining moral understanding.

The analysis of Murdoch's thought is conducted through close readings of her work, discussions of the secondary literature, as well as by clarifying and developing key points through readings of Simone Weil, from whom Murdoch derives the idea of attention.

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Abbreviations

Works by Iris Murdoch:

DPR: *The Darkness of Practical Reason* (1966), EM, 193-202

EM: *Existentialists and Mystics* (1999)

FS: *The Fire and The Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (1977), EM, 386-463

MGM: *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992)

NP: *Nostalgia for the Particular* (1952), EM, 43-58

SG: *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970)

TL: *Thinking and Language* (1951), EM, 33-42

VCM: *Vision and Choice in Morality* (1956), EM, 76-98 (with omissions)

Works by Simone Weil:

FLN: *First and Last Notebooks* (1970)

GG: *Gravity and Grace* (2002)

HP: *Human Personality* (1962)

NB: *The Notebooks of Simone Weil* (2013)

RRSS: *Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God* (1942), WG, 66-76

SN: *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* (1968)

WG: *Waiting on God* (1978)

Works by Ludwig Wittgenstein:

PI: *Philosophical Investigations* (2009)

Introduction

This work is about the moral importance of what we see and know, and about our responsibility in seeing what we see and knowing what we know. Before we explicitly evaluate the facts at hand, before deliberating on the relative value of the different aspects of a problem, there are questions about how we establish what counts as a problem, what aspects of reality strike us, how and why we *let* them – or do not let them – strike us.

More specifically, this work is about attention, understood as patient, honest, unselfish and emotionally engaged receptivity to the value that is in reality, and to the demands that it makes on us.¹ This conceptualisation of attention and the relative arguments for being more mindful of the importance of attention in morality and for the existence of a moral reality come from Iris Murdoch. This thesis is an examination and development of the idea of attention as found within her philosophy.

The key idea that I develop from Murdoch is that being attentive is of central importance in morality, because it enables the individual to apprehend the moral relevance of what confronts her. In the most successful cases of attention, the result is a clear apprehension of moral reality, which includes the motivation to respond appropriately. While the exercise of attention makes the apprehension of moral reality possible, however, because of the complexity of individuals, the difficulty of fully attending, and factors outside one's control, attention is not sufficient to ensure right moral understanding and right action. For these reasons, the

¹The connection with patience and presence can make the exploration of attention particularly timely. As Bauman and Donskis (2014) have argued, the main reason why 21st Century society is, as they believe, moving towards 'moral blindness', is the loss of the ability to be present and appreciate the particularity of individuals, partly caused by the increasing use of certain kinds of technology. Two decades ago, Murdoch had similar complaints in relation to television: see MGM 110, 372 and 377, where she claims that television 'impairs our power to perceive' (MGM 377). As we shall see (Chapter 3), attending involves both striving towards clear vision and refraining from imposing interpretations, which can mean patiently waiting for our faculties to become attuned to the object and for its manifold aspects to reveal themselves. In the context of art – one of Murdoch's favourite areas of comparisons with ethics – Roberts (2013) has recently called for the recuperation, in art students, but also in everyone, of precisely this sort of attention, which she believes to be essential to be able to see what is in a painting (but also in reality more generally): 'I would argue that these are the kind of practices that now most need to be actively engineered by faculty, because they simply are no longer available ... It is commonly assumed that vision is immediate ... But what students learn in a visceral way is that in any work of art there are details and orders and relationships that take time to perceive' (Roberts 2013).

considerations and arguments put forward in this work do not attempt to draw an exhaustive picture of morality or to present a moral theory, which Murdoch does not offer, but rather aim to explore the role of attention in morality and to highlight its significance.

If being attentive contributes to correct moral understanding, then attention is something that one ought to exercise. The exercise of attention has two main, often interconnected, manifestations. One is that there are things that we may wish to ignore, but that in order to be morally responsible we ought not to ignore. The other is that, while some things are within our field of vision, we may not fully engage with them, we may ‘look’ without ‘seeing’, and wilfully though perhaps not fully consciously ignore certain aspects, block our sympathy, avoid exercising the imagination, etc.² Attention involves not just ‘knowledge’, but rather, with Cavell (1979), ‘acknowledgment’.³

Attention stands at the opposite end of, and is meant to prevent or combat, moral blindness, and other forms of moral visual impairment (where vision is intended both metaphorically and literally). Thinking about the importance of attention involves recognising that sometimes we are too lazy, fearful, distracted, careless, hurried, committed to certain positions, to see clearly. And that, Murdoch argues, is where a lot of moral failures begin: not in deliberation, not in choice, but in knowledge and perception. As Raimond Gaita puts it, ‘much moral failing is not a failure to do something that falls under a rule or a principle: it is a failure to rise to what we are called to become – someone who is authentically present in speech and deed’ (Gaita 2004: 142).

² For example: a plea to attend, which includes both aspects of attention just described, takes up a large part of J.M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* (1999). The main character, Elizabeth Costello, is giving a speech about how the ways in which we relate to non-human animals are defective because inattentive. First, she laments the fact that slaughterhouses are kept hidden and outside city centres, so that we can avoid knowing much about what happens there. Second, she urges her listeners to attend to animals, ‘not only intellectually but with their whole being’, in order to more fully understand what the animal is, what she is going through, and what life means to her. Poetry, the protagonist says, can help to achieve this kind of ‘presence’, but more often we should resort to actual experience: ‘and if the poets do not move you, I urge you to walk, flank to flank, beside the beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner’ (Coetzee 1999: 114).

³ Cavell elaborates the idea of acknowledgement in the context of scepticism about other minds, claiming that what counters scepticism is not a kind of impossibly conclusive ‘knowledge’ about another person, but an acknowledgement, which shows in our responses to them. This view is inspired by Wittgenstein’s remarks on scepticism (for ex: ‘my attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the opinion that he has a soul’ (PI, p.178), which will be relevant in Chapter 5).

The idea that the ways in which the individual approaches reality are of great moral importance is central to Murdoch's moral philosophy, and it is also an idea that is enjoying a growing interest in contemporary moral philosophy more generally. The possibility of direct apprehension of value is being explored by intuitionist philosophers (McNaughton 1988, Audi 2004 and 2013, Huemer 2005, Dancy 2006), and Murdoch can be credited with being one of the first to rekindle interest in that view, by declaring, at the opening of the *Sovereignty of Good* (1970), that part of her project consists in a defence of Moore (1903) and his idea that good is an object of knowledge or 'vision' (SG 3-4). In a different area of contemporary thought, feminist ethics of care, most philosophers who support it have taken up Murdoch's idea of attention as central to their theory, which also emphasises particularity, emotions, and the importance of the individual (see Ruddick 1989, Noddings 1984, Baier 1994).

These are some of the reasons to return to Murdoch's work and analyse the idea of attention as presented by her. Two further reasons relate more closely to Murdoch's philosophy. One is the growing interest in Murdoch's philosophical work, after years of almost exclusive academic focus on her fiction. Several analyses of Murdoch's philosophy have been published in recent years (among which are Laverty 2007, Altorf 2008, Antonaccio 2000 and 2012b); yet, on the one hand, there remain controversial interpretative difficulties relating to Murdoch's thought more generally, and on the other, there is as yet no study which focuses on her concept of attention. The second reason for a fuller exploration of Murdoch's philosophy in relation to her concept of attention is that Murdoch offers a complex and far reaching metaphysical and psychological picture, which functions as essential background to her ideas about the role of attention.

Because of the extensive nature of Murdoch's work, which spans metaphysics, meta-ethics, epistemology and moral psychology, the analysis of attention in Murdoch has been conducted as if through a prism, which refracts the idea of attention among its various aspects, its underpinnings and its implications. The underpinnings of the importance of attention are found in Murdoch's metaphysics, so that is where my exploration begins (Chapter 1). There are two ideas which come together in Murdoch's claim that 'goodness is connected with knowledge' (SG 38). On the one hand, the object of knowledge is, for Murdoch, a moral reality, which divides between the ideal Good and the value which is part of

the world. At the same time, for Murdoch, moral reality is not known impersonally and passively, but through the active exercise of the individual's faculties which are guided by value. The quote above reads in full:

It is perfectly obvious that goodness *is* connected with knowledge: not with impersonal quasi-scientific knowledge of the ordinary world, but with a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one's eyes but of a certainly perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline (SG 38).

Value is, Murdoch claims, both a real constituent of the world and a transcendental condition of consciousness. Both claims justify the importance of attention: attention is what discovers value in reality, and it is itself a moral faculty/attitude. The two claims, however, appear incompatible: how can value be both a structure of the mind and part of reality? Chapter 2 attempts to delineate a framework which, consistently with Murdoch's ideas, smooths out the tension between these two underpinnings of attention.

While the first two chapters provide the background to attention, the remaining chapters are explorations of the concept of attention itself (Chapters 3 and 4), how it operates in moral perception (Chapter 5) and what it requires of the self (Chapter 6 and 7). With the exception of Chapter 5, Chapters 3 to 7 are investigations in moral psychology, broadly understood. The importance of the individual's evaluative states of minds, faculties and attitudes in apprehending reality, which connects with the second of the two underpinnings of attention indicated in the metaphysics (the evaluative nature of consciousness), is crucial to understanding attention, so Chapters 3 and 4 are dedicated to exploring this topic and to explaining how individual moral effort and character traits are required to perceive and understand reality clearly and correctly. If attention – as opposed to mere 'looking' – is what reveals moral reality, that is because moral reality (and reality more generally) is not simply and immediately available to anyone, but requires the correct application of concepts, the use of the imagination to disclose possibilities, and virtues such as honesty, humility, truthfulness, patience, and love. Murdoch's epistemology and moral psychology are linked by this conception of perception and knowledge, whereby apprehension of reality (the main moral goal) is something to be achieved through moral effort.

Chapter 5 unites the considerations about the moral nature of consciousness with the arguments about moral realism, in an exploration of attentive moral

perception, understood as morally laden perception of a moral reality, and of how that can result not only in moral understanding but also in moral motivation. The chapter concludes the explanation of how the importance of attention in morality can be justified within Murdoch's philosophy. Questions remain, however, about how the individual can practise attention, given Murdoch's individuation of the self as the main impediment to attention. Chapters 6 and 7 address these questions, exploring the role of the self, how it contributes to and how it interferes with correct apprehension of reality.

What emerges is what may be called a contemplative and perfectionistic view of the moral life. Contemplative, because the main burden of morality lies in perception and knowledge (for this reason, throughout the thesis, I have talked about the 'moral subject', instead of the 'moral agent').⁴ Perfectionistic, because goodness consists in a constantly perfectible apprehension of a perpetually receding reality. The moral life is considered by Murdoch as a sort of pilgrimage towards a very distant but real goal (the Good), the understanding of which changes as we move and learn and deepen our experience. This idea is one of many indications of Murdoch's Platonic inheritance, which runs through her whole work, more often through brief references than systematic discussions (with the exception of FS). Many of the ideas presented in this thesis, therefore, have their origin in Murdoch's reading of Plato; because my aim is to clarify Murdoch's thought, however, I do not address the question of whether Murdoch's reading of Plato is correct. The other pervasive influence on Murdoch's thought is Simone Weil. The very idea of attention, as Murdoch acknowledges, is 'borrowed' from Weil, together with other related ideas. For this reason, Weil accompanies the entirety of the present work, as a minor key, whose own thought emerges mainly when Murdoch's treatment of a problem could benefit with being illuminated by similar ideas more clearly and exhaustively expressed by Weil.

In the next chapter, I start the exploration of attention in Murdoch by introducing Murdoch's metaphysics and its key concepts. Before fully engaging with Murdoch's philosophy, I present some considerations about her method, which is not standard in contemporary analytic philosophy, due to its reliance on ordinary experience and a broadening of what can be considered empirical and objective.

⁴ See Chapter 3§2.6, however, for some caveats about defining Murdoch's view as 'contemplative'.

Another philosophical ally, Ludwig Wittgenstein, will emerge in the discussion of Murdoch's method. The same patient and honest observation of reality, which Murdoch recommends for the moral life in the form of attention, is found to be central to her philosophical method, in which she takes herself to be following Wittgenstein, with his exhortation: 'don't think, but look!' (PI 66) – and it is in the practise of that looking that all the difficulties of philosophy and morality lie.

Chapter 1

Iris Murdoch's Method and Metaphysics

Introduction

This chapter and the following one constitute an introduction to, and a critique of, Murdoch's moral metaphysics. While I offer an overall picture of the metaphysical framework that Murdoch presents, the picture does not aim to be exhaustive. The aim of discussing Murdoch's metaphysics is to provide a background upon which the concept of attention can be understood and justified. What is required for a moral philosophy in which attention is central is a metaphysics which accounts for i) the existence of a moral reality, which is revealed by attention; ii) the possibility for the mind to access moral reality; iii) the value of the enterprise of accessing moral reality. The second and third aspects, which are the kernel of the idea that attention is a central concept in morality, are also reflected and developed in Murdoch's moral psychology, which I discuss in Chapters 3 and 4.

In the present chapter I provide an overview of Murdoch's moral philosophy, identifying its central elements and highlighting the tensions which arise. I discuss these concerns in Chapter 2. The main difficulty, it will emerge, is that of reconciling Murdoch's transcendental ideas, whereby consciousness is inherently evaluative, with the realistic strain, or the idea that there exists an objective moral reality, which exists independent of the individual's perception of it. In this chapter, the problem is presented, but not yet analysed, in relation to the idea of the Good, central to Murdoch's metaphysics, whereby the Good appears both as a regulative ideal and as a real object.

The discussion of Murdoch's metaphysics requires some preliminary methodological considerations, which I discuss in §2, and which provide the background against which the whole analysis needs to be understood. Murdoch's philosophy takes as its starting point the observation of human experience, including everyday moral intuitions and beliefs. Such observation is conducted not with a scientific method but with the same all-round sensitivity that she recommends in the moral life. What emerges, therefore, is that attention is not only a central concept within moral philosophy, but also and at the same time part of a sound philosophical method.

1 Murdoch's Philosophy

Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy constitutes a vast and complex system or structure that falls within a number of areas and positions in ethics.⁵ Murdoch's work is a contribution to moral metaphysics, moral psychology and epistemology. As for its meta-ethical positions, Murdoch's philosophy supports, broadly, a form of moral realism and moral cognitivism.⁶ Neither of these attributions is uncontroversial, and in this chapter and the one that follows I shall clarify the reasons for the controversies and for classifying Murdoch in this way.

I shall defend, with qualifications and explanations, the position that Murdoch is a moral realist and a cognitivist, because she believes that the Good and value exist in reality, that moral concepts have correct and incorrect applications, and that moral reality can be apprehended. That is made possible by adopting a particular attitude which engages the whole person or by exercising a particular faculty which is a cluster of several other faculties. This faculty or attitude, which enables the subject to apprehend moral reality, is what Murdoch calls 'attention'. The idea of attention is spelled out in a moral psychology that focuses on the way that self and desires can aid or hamper morality. The possibility of apprehending moral reality through attention, in turn, indicates that Murdoch supports moral perception, because apprehension of moral reality is not considered as occurring only through the intellect, but also and at the same time through the senses, and because she believes that perception itself – and all cognitive activity – is a form of evaluation. Therefore, in referring to attention as 'moral perception' (or, following Murdoch, 'moral vision'⁷), I shall mean to include intellectual understanding as part of perception. Lastly, if moral reality can be perceived, this needs to happen in particular instances; this idea, coupled with the thought that the Good, though

⁵ By using the word 'system', I do not wish to suggest that Murdoch's philosophy is a 'systematic moral theory' as defined, for example, by Chappell (2014: 1-4): if systematic moral theories aim at being exclusively true, and practise abstraction at the expense of experience and particularity, then Murdoch very emphatically does not offer such a theory (see §2 below). What I mean by 'system' is merely that Murdoch's work contains coherent arguments with consistent strands that are developed in the course of her books.

⁶ I write 'broadly' because Murdoch's position is in many ways so idiosyncratic that placing her squarely within any existing school or theory would fail to do her justice. For an elaboration of Murdoch's maverick position within moral philosophy, see Cora Diamond (2010, 2014).

⁷ 'Moral vision' is to be understood more broadly than mere visual perception, although the choice of vision among the senses is not arbitrary. For a discussion of the role of vision in attention, see Ch.3§2.1.

unitary, is indefinable,⁸ and cannot therefore provide guidance as to the value of particular objects prior to experience, makes it plausible to see Murdoch as supporting a form of particularism: on her model, one has to look and see.⁹

These views are developed around a number of key concepts and related problems, which recur under different aspects throughout Murdoch's philosophical work. These concepts are: the Good; unity and multiplicity; the individual; consciousness; perception; transcendence; transcendental conditions; reality; truth; energy; love; attention; unselfing. Some of these concepts belong to metaphysics, others to moral psychology, others to both, and there is a close-knit relationship among all of them, where the metaphysical concepts call for the psychological ones, and vice versa. Most of these concepts, moreover, have in Murdoch a non-standard meaning, which needs to be spelled out in order to grasp her overall view: for example, when Murdoch claims that morality is connected with knowledge of reality (SG 38), it is not only the much-contested notion of morality that she is providing a new view of, but 'reality' and 'knowledge' are also partially redefined, where 'reality' is something that is dependent on the human activity of conceptualising, and 'knowledge' is seen as both an endless task and a specifically moral one. The way in which one engages with Murdoch's philosophy, therefore, depends to a large extent on whether one accepts her use of key concepts. If those are accepted, the picture of morality that Murdoch suggests almost automatically follows.

The use of the concepts above, in their special meaning, also engenders in Murdoch's metaphysics a series of tensions, which are characteristic of her philosophy. Sometimes the tension is fruitful, indicating a necessary difficulty in moral thinking that needs to be sustained, and it is misguided to seek a solution. At other times, the tension finds a solution in a blending of two apparent opposites, which turn out not to be incompatible. An instance of the first kind is the combination of the multiplicity, chaos, and lack of finality of the world, with the desire and indeed the need to find order and meaning in it, which in the context of morality finds expression precisely in Murdoch's main philosophical goal, the possibility of having a metaphysical picture to guide morals, without making up the

⁸ This is one central point of agreement with G.E. Moore, which Murdoch declares at the outset of SG.

⁹ See §3 below.

former or forcing the complexity of life into the mould of an unrealistic (i.e. not descriptive or illuminating of the world) metaphysics. At the same time – an instance of the second possibility – what is real and imperfect and what is ideal can also blend, by recognising intimations of the Good in objects which are good only to a degree. Murdoch’s overall philosophical endeavour is an attempt to accommodate the ‘two-way movement’ that she identifies in philosophy at the opening of SG, holding together metaphysics and empiricism, theories and simple facts, in a dualism that she sees as characterising most philosophy, but is rarely found within a single philosopher or theory.¹⁰

In what follows, I provide an overview of Murdoch’s metaphysics in order to clarify some of the key concepts that I shall use throughout this work, and to being to spell out the background upon which a morality that centres upon attention can be understood. Before doing so, I shall briefly explore Murdoch’s philosophical method, itself idiosyncratic, both in order to better understand the way in which Murdoch reaches her positions, and in order to present and justify a method which also informs the present work.

2 Murdoch’s Philosophical Method

Murdoch occupies a maverick place in moral philosophy, which constitutes one reason for the interpretative difficulties her readers face. This is so not only in terms of the contents of her theory, but also because of her particular philosophical method. In fact, Murdoch’s method and content cannot be separated, both because the former determines the latter, and because they rely on similar cognitive practises. The central kind of argument in Murdoch’s metaphysics, as well as moral psychology, relies on what she terms ‘empirical observation’. The object of such observation is most often the human mind, in its general tendencies (as in the observation that ‘human beings are naturally selfish’, SG 78), as well as through phenomenological remarks, regarding moral thinking and the experience of value in the world and of the Good.

Regarding moral experience, Murdoch is interested in doing justice to the way that the ordinary person thinks about morality, including ‘the philosopher outside his study’ (MGM 160). That is her starting point: commonsensical

¹⁰ Antonaccio (2012a) rightly stresses the centrality of the two-way movement in Murdoch’s philosophy.

observations which are meant to capture how we, as human beings, tend to live our lives in relation to morality: ‘the appeal to evidence, to reports of experience ... is in some regions of philosophy not only the last resort but the proper and best move’ (MGM 430). Of course, such observations are not meant to settle the question, but they are an ineliminable starting point. Instead of laying out a metaphysical theory and then judging experience on its basis, Murdoch starts with experience and constructs a metaphysics that can do justice to it. The very idea of the Good, Murdoch’s most abstract concept, depends on experience, is ‘suggested’ by it. For these reasons, Chappell (2014) considers Murdoch as inheriting what he considers Plato’s experiential approach, where the arguments are rooted in experience and not in a priori considerations (2014: 298-300, 312-2): ‘if a moral philosophy does not give a satisfactory or sufficiently rich account of what we unphilosophically know to be goodness, then away with it’ (EM 215, quoted in Chappell 2014: 322). It can be said, then, that Murdoch’s approach to moral metaphysics is bottom up: from everyday experience, a metaphysical picture is derived.

Murdoch is careful not to present her metaphysics as a closed and exhaustive system; what she claims to offer is ‘a metaphysical background’ (SG 43) which can work to explain the moral life, but not to constrain its possibilities: a ‘metaphysical position but no metaphysical form’ (SG 73). The reason lies in her conviction that any such system would not do justice to what it tries to capture and explain, and that systems should not take precedence over reality. Metaphysics is useful because, Murdoch holds, human understanding works by grasping the complexity of the world through some kind of form; the challenge, then, is to apprehend reality through it without distorting what is apprehended. Forms can be useful models for reality, but they should not pretend to contain all of it. That can be one reason why Murdoch’s metaphysical model is not fully spelled out, remaining an open unity – unlike the closed unity of most standard philosophical theories. The image Murdoch favours is that of a broken circle, which hints at a form which contains a portion of reality, but does not close off other possibilities (MGM 88). This is an aspect of the general problem, which Murdoch identifies in philosophy as well as in life, of connecting multiplicity and chaos with form and order: there is the experience of life and the world as messy, chaotic, pointless and ungovernable, and at the same time there is the inescapable human need to order and make sense of it all. This tension is found in the oppositions of particularity and

generality, of the notion of unified self contrasted with our multifarious experience, of the formal unity of art, philosophy, religion, compared to the complex and inexhaustible life they try to capture; and in the contrast between metaphysics and morals (cf. MGM 146).

I have spoken of a metaphysical picture as being derived from the experience of life with morality, which may sound more like ‘morals as a guide to metaphysics’ rather than the other way round, as the title of Murdoch’s last philosophical work presents it. I have also spoken, however, of such metaphysical model as explaining and illuminating aspects of morality and being able to guide the individual in her thought and in her life. It then appears that the relation between metaphysics and morals is reciprocal or, as Murdoch suggests, circular. Such reciprocity or circularity also has another, deeper sense: experience and a general picture of the world are helpful to explain one another, but they are also related because metaphysics is itself not independent of morality. What we understand as metaphysics, the kind of metaphysical pictures we are prepared to accept and understand, are partly expressions of our moral thinking. For instance, the very idea that metaphysics must be prior to moral thought is, for Murdoch, a moral notion. This claim hinges on Murdoch’s general argument about fact and value, related to her idea of the ubiquity of value in consciousness (explained in §3 below). For the moment, what matters is that Murdoch’s metaphysical picture is not to be understood as a free-standing, logically irrefutable model, but as a picture that is i) suggested by human experience of morality and ii) not understood independently of moral thinking.

Cora Diamond (2010, 2014) has offered an exhaustive and helpful commentary on Murdoch’s understanding of the nature and methods of moral philosophy. In (2014), Diamond lists a number of ways in which Murdoch challenges contemporary moral philosophy. Two elements are given particular relevance by Diamond: Murdoch’s broadening of both the scope and the ‘possible methods’ of moral philosophy, and her ‘anti-dictationism’. The latter refers to the refusal to let other branches of philosophy, such as epistemology, or indeed metaphysics, dictate what morality is and how it can operate. The reason, as mentioned above, is that moral thought is not a sub-category of thinking, but part and parcel of thought about the world: ‘ethics cannot be dictated to by epistemology

and metaphysics, but can rather tell them about the character of reality and what it is to know it' (Diamond 2010: 61).

Diamond's interest in Murdoch's reconfiguring of the scope of morality and moral philosophy chimes with her own philosophical project. The same considerations about the fundamentally moral character of all thinking support the observations about this point too. If thought about life, the particular concepts we use as well as the broader conceptual schemes through which we approach the world, are seen as expressive of, or determined by, moral attitudes, then moral philosophy is no longer only about propositions containing moral concepts; rather, its domain becomes impossible to delineate clearly. Thus Murdoch broadens the possibilities of moral philosophy in two ways: by opening up its subject matter, which is now seen as not specifiable in advance; and by including *modes* of reflection, independent of what reflection takes as its object: 'the area of morals, and ergo of moral philosophy, can now be seen, not as a hole-and-corner matter of debts and promises, but as covering the whole of our mode of living and the quality of our relations with the world' (SG 97).

In the light of both anti-dictationism and of the broadening of the scope of moral philosophy, Murdoch's preferred starting point – the observation of experience – also takes on a different meaning. First, it is important for moral philosophy to concern itself with experience, not only experience concerning explicitly moral situations, but more broadly having to do with ways of thinking of, and responding to, all kinds of situations, as well as life in general. Second, what experience is need not be determined by the empirical sciences. Diamond has helpful reflections on both points, but the latter is of most concern here because it can shed light on the way in which Murdoch's claims about experience and psychology are to be understood, and it can help answer objections about their grounding.

Murdoch's main method, as I have sketched it, is called by Diamond 'Reflective Empiricism' or 'humanistic reflection on experience' (Diamond 2014). The main objection to this method is that, unless claims about experience are grounded in empirical science (empirical psychology, for instance), they are not properly grounded at all. The claim that a proper account of experience must rely on empirical science, Diamond points out, depends in turn on certain assumptions about the nature of knowledge, namely the idea that objective knowledge is only

achieved by a kind of observation which is independent of morality. As we have seen, Murdoch challenges this assumption, asking us to consider examples from literary fiction: are the descriptions of inner life presented by, for instance, Henry James, less adequate than a scientific psychological report? That they are not is not a matter of logic, but of how we respond to life. Murdoch offers no irrefutable argument for taking her kind of empiricism to be equally if not more illuminating than that of natural science, but invites the reader to consider whether such accounts do shed light on experience and morality. Her view, she claims, ‘must be judged by its power to connect, to illuminate, to explain and to make new and fruitful places for moral reflection’ (SG 45).¹¹ The appeal of Murdoch’s empirical observations is likely not to be universal, nor are her remarks meant to crystallise experience. Rather, as Diamond (2014) suggests, following Bernard Williams (2008: 171), statements about ‘what it is like for *us*’ are presented as an *invitation*, asking us, the readers, to consider what we do think, as well as what we may need to think about, as individuals, but also as human beings.

From these observations we can notice an aspect of Murdoch’s moral philosophy which is particularly relevant for the present purposes, and which Diamond herself remarks on: the fact that Murdoch’s method relies on the same kind of *attention*, an inextricably moral and cognitive enterprise, which is at the heart of what she thinks the good person should practise.¹² The fact that philosophical method and normative theory converge is consistent with Murdoch’s arguments about the ubiquity of value. Like the moral agent – or, rather, *as* a moral agent – the philosopher’s task is to attend to the multifarious aspects of life, which involves resisting the temptation to force those aspects into a single theory, being open to conflicting observations, and bringing her imagination to bear on what she is observing; furthermore, in practising this kind of ‘careful and reflective’ ‘humanistic’ attention (Diamond 2014), the philosopher needs to be exercising moral virtues: honesty, humility, the courage to see things as they are, the suppression of the ego’s demands, which may emerge as the desire to support a particular theory by overlooking some facts, etc.

¹¹ Another strength of Murdoch’s account, as she herself points out, is that it is able to explain the attraction of the scientific attitude, while empiricists cannot explain the appeal of Murdoch’s account (SG 45).

¹² Diamond (2014) comments that, on this view, the distinction between ethics and meta-ethics collapses.

Such description of the philosopher's activity has close kinship with the views of another philosopher, whom Murdoch both admired and regarded with suspicion: Ludwig Wittgenstein.¹³ Murdoch herself mentions Wittgenstein's influence on her in a personal letter, saying that the influence mainly lies in her way of doing philosophy.¹⁴ Wittgenstein holds that philosophy proceeds through, first of all, paying careful attention to one's subject matter and doing justice to the diversity of cases one is presented with, as opposed to being tempted to formulate a theory which provides rules to specify how things 'must' be in every single case. Philosophical progress, for Wittgenstein, comes about through 'changing one's way of looking at things' (PI 144) (notice here too the metaphor of vision), and this change in one's way of seeing requires not only the exercise of rationality, but also will, honesty and courage.¹⁵ These elements of Wittgenstein's thought have led some of his readers to suggest that Wittgenstein's whole philosophy carries a moral significance.¹⁶ James Edwards has even noticed the similarity between Wittgenstein and Murdoch, comparing what he sees as Wittgenstein's ethical vision of 'sound human understanding' and Murdoch's 'ethic of love' (Edwards 1982: 237). Both philosophers, Edwards writes, uphold a view of living and thinking in which 'we must work to notice whatever is before our eyes. To give the attentive care worthy of a lover, to continue to focus one's attention so as to bring depth, demand from us rich resources of the mind' (Edwards 1982: 241).¹⁷

¹³ B.S. Heusel (1986) also remarks on the connection between Murdochian attention and Wittgenstein's method introducing her Wittgensteinian interpretation of Murdoch's *A World Child*; Sabina Lovibond notes the methodological connection in the idea of 'looking' between Wittgenstein and Simone Weil, who inspired Murdoch on this and other points (Lovibond 2011: 29).

¹⁴ '[Wittgenstein] has influenced my philosophical style, in the widest sense of that word [:] that is, I have been affected (I hope) by his slow and meticulous methods of working' (Murdoch, quoted in Heusel 1986: 82).

¹⁵ Cf. for example these remarks, which chime perfectly with Murdoch's understanding of knowledge and the role of character in acquiring it: 'What makes a subject hard to understand – if it's something significant and important – is not that before you can understand it you need to be specially trained in abstruse matters, but the contrast between understanding the subject and what most people *want* to see. Because of this the very things which are most obvious may become the hardest of all to understand. What has to be overcome is a difficulty having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect' (Wittgenstein 1980: 17e); and: 'what I do think is essential is carrying out the work of clarification with COURAGE; otherwise it becomes just a clever game' (1980: 19e).

¹⁶ Cf. Edwards: 'The fundamental intention of Wittgenstein's thinking, in both its periods, is its attempt to incarnate a vision of the healthy human life; the transmission of a moral vision ... is the true burden of all his philosophical work' (Edwards 1982: 203). See also C. Diamond (2000), J. Conant (2002), S. Cavell (1979: Part 3), O. Kuusela (2008: Chapter 7), R. Read (2010).

¹⁷ Cf. also Simone Weil for a very similar thought: 'the proper method of philosophy consists in clearly conceiving insoluble problems in all their insolubility and then in simply contemplating them, fixedly and tirelessly, year after year, without any hope, patiently waiting' (FLN 335).

These fascinating parallels must remain, here, a mere hint, serving mainly to bring out how Murdoch's notion of attention reaches so far as to include her philosophical method itself. Murdoch's own preferred examples of attentive individuals are artists and writers: like the artist and the novelist, the philosopher is required to overcome the self and, first of all, to 'just look' – where 'just' does not refer to an ease in attention, but to a simplicity given by the removal of interference. Murdoch's philosophical method and her prescriptive theory about the good person merge in the idea of attention. In the present work, I follow Murdoch in taking experience as primary in morality, where the meaning of 'experience' is both shifted and broadened along the lines just explored. Moreover, as in Murdoch's work, the aim here is not to suggest an exhaustive model which fits all situations and individuals, or an infallible guide to the moral life; that would require occupying the very position from outside the human perspective which, as Murdoch notes, no philosopher can occupy. The upshot of the observations of experience, and of the theoretical discussions thence derived, will be, rather, to highlight and justify attention as one important and indeed crucial element of morality, without claiming that it exhausts morality nor that no other model can be helpful in moral thinking; without, in Murdoch's words, closing the circle.

3 Murdoch's Metaphysics: An Overview

The remarks on Murdoch's method should be kept in mind when engaging with her metaphysics. This section sets out the main elements of Murdoch's metaphysics, in order to provide a framework in which to understand the nature of the task of living a morally good life. Tensions will emerge, which I shall flag here, to be more thoroughly addressed in Chapters 2 and 5.

The central problem of moral philosophy, according to Murdoch, is how to make oneself morally better. The process of moral improvement consists for Murdoch in 'purifying one's energy', whereby 'energy' (i.e. the motivation and desires that depend on the background of one's consciousness) is best guided and moved by the idea of something perfect. The one object which has traditionally been able to bring about this kind of purification is taken by Murdoch to be God, and prayer is seen as the process of such purification. The concepts of God and of prayer in Murdoch are also non-standard: prayer is defined (following Simone Weil, although unacknowledged; cf. WG 66) as 'attention to God which is a form

of love' (SG 55) and God (whom Murdoch does not believe in, and whom she thinks in the modern Western world is increasingly difficult to believe in) looks more akin to the God of the mystics, where what is central is the transcendent and transformative aspect, while omnipotence and omniscience are less relevant in her picture.¹⁸ Prayer to God is considered here as the activity *par excellence* which is able to purify the mind of the individual, through attention to an external ideal of perfection. Likewise, morality, Murdoch holds, is primarily to be conceived as centred around the purification of the consciousness of the individual – as opposed, for instance, to being focused on defining right action. Consciousness is for Murdoch the 'locus' of morality, because, as we shall see, morality is concerned with modes of awareness of reality, and also because action depends on one's state of consciousness. As prayer to God is able to purify the consciousness of the believer, inspiring her with an ideal of perfection, Murdoch claims that there is a similar process and object that can purify the consciousness of the secular individual, by turning her mind to an ideal of perfection: the process is attention, and the object is the Good.¹⁹

Central to Murdoch's metaphysics is the idea of the Good, which she sometimes spells with a capital 'G'²⁰ to signal its unique status and its kinship with Plato's Form of the Good. The Good is defined in SG as a 'transcendent magnetic centre' (SG 75) and discussed as 'the idea of perfection' and the 'absolute' in human life. In 'On God and Good' (SG) Murdoch argues that the central concept of moral philosophy, a morally purifying source and object of attention, possesses all the following characteristics traditionally attributed to God: 'a single, perfect, transcendent, non-representable, necessarily real object of attention' (SG 55). The list contains the keywords of Murdoch's metaphysics of the Good. Let us then look

¹⁸ Bernard McGinn (1998) has defined mysticism as 'a special consciousness of the presence of God that by definition exceeds description and results in a transformation of the subject who receives it' (McGinn 1998: 26), which fits exactly Murdoch's description of attention to God. More generally, Murdoch's discussion of religion and God has similarities with the negative way and with the mysticism associated with it, in particular that of St. John of the Cross, who takes 'attention' or 'loving attention' to be the proper attitude in prayer, and who in turn influenced Simone Weil (See *The Dark Night of the Soul* I.10.4 and *The Living Flame of Love* III.33).

¹⁹ In SG Murdoch writes that it is a 'psychological fact' that God is a powerful source of energy, and it is also a psychological fact that we receive moral help by focusing on valuable things (SG 56).

²⁰ Throughout the present work, I will use the capitalised 'Good' for consistency, unless otherwise stated, to refer to the ideal. I also keep to the capitalisation in order to maintain a clear difference between 'Good' as transcendent ideal and 'good' as the ordinary property of morally good things, actions and people in the world. This point is discussed in Ch.2§4 below.

at the elements of this definition, which will call up the remaining concepts central to Murdoch's philosophy.

Murdoch is explicit about the tension between unity and plurality in morality, a tension which is present within her own account of morality and of the Good. The dichotomy bears on one of the central questions of moral philosophy, whether the moral value of individual instances is to be assessed only case by case, or by applying a universal rule to the specific case, the question at the centre of the debate between generalists and particularists. On the one hand, the Good is a general and unitary ideal, which guides the individual in perception, and can therefore be understood as a principle. Therefore, i) if the perception of moral features can be guided by a principle which directs the mind to the discovery of moral reality,²¹ and/or ii) if moral perception is understood as perception of universal features instanced in particulars, then the idea of the Good seems to place Murdoch's view among the generalists. However, both criteria can be challenged: i) on the one hand, all that the Good does is to inspire the individual with the correct approach to reality which enables her to discover moral truths, but does not provide rules as to what counts as good;²² ii) on the other, the idea of the Good itself is formed through perception of particular goods, which makes particular goods primary and therefore not requiring the application of a principle in order to be identified. Whether we conclude that Murdoch is a particularist or not, my purpose at present is to set out the concept of the Good and highlight its complexity, containing both universalistic features (as a regulative ideal) and particularistic ones (as something that is discovered through particular moral properties). I do not attempt to settle the matter here, although my discussion of attention as moral perception, as will become clear, fits within a particularistic framework.²³

As we have seen, Murdoch claims in SG that like God, the Good must be unitary. Three reasons can be identified in SG for thinking of the Good as unitary. The first appeals to the Aristotelian notion of the unity of virtues: courage is not

²¹ As Clarke (2012) and Antonaccio (2000) hold.

²² Clarke (2012) suggests that these considerations do not need to exclude the idea that Good is a principle, but that it needs to be regarded as a second-order principle.

²³ Among the defenders of Murdochian particularism are Elijah Millgram (2005) and L.A. Blum (1994), while Maria Antonaccio (2000) and Bridget Clarke (2012) see the Good as a principle guiding the individual to the truth, and therefore deny that Murdoch is a particularist. Julia Driver (2012) offers a third possibility, suggesting that Murdoch was a 'methodological particularist', but not a 'substantive particularist', i.e. a particularist about moral metaphysics.

such without temperance, love needs kindness, etc.... so that to excel in one virtue one needs to possess the others. This is true not only of virtues, but of moral concepts generally, which Murdoch sees as internally related, as part of a 'scheme of concepts' whereby the understanding of one concept develops and is influenced by the understanding of others, forming a general background in which, if something shifts, the rest is variously affected (SG 32-33). Secondly, Murdoch seems to offer a conceptual and linguistic observation to the effect that we recognise various and dissimilar things as good, without them appearing to share anything except their goodness. One way to understand this idea is that Good is a property that is shared by, or contained in, all things that are good.

The two observations can be connected: if Good is a property that is instanced in each good object, this can also explain the relation of moral concepts and virtues to each other. What is important to stress is that for Murdoch the Good, conceived in this way, is not to be understood in terms of any other property: good things may share nothing but their goodness. On this point, Murdoch quotes G.E. Moore's anti naturalistic argument with approval, at the very start of SG.²⁴ The important corollary of this idea is that the unity of Good does not provide criteria for identifying good things. Good things can only be 'seen' to be good. Hence, the burden of morality lies, as Murdoch insists, on particular forms of perception – 'vision'²⁵ – and the faculties and attitudes that make them possible – 'attention'.

However, Murdoch also offers a third, and apparently conflicting, reason to think of the Good as unity. Good things, besides being related to each other, are also related hierarchically, in degrees or 'scales' of goodness. Instances of kindness, generosity, courage, appear to us as related, in their imperfection, to ideal instances of the same virtuous actions. What relates them, Murdoch suggests, is the Good. On this picture, the Good is considered to be the general form of perfection that lies at the end of the scale, and that in relation to which good things obtain their goodness. This second claim complicates matters, but it is at the heart of Murdoch's argument for the existence of the Good. On this view, rather than a common

²⁴ This is true despite the fact that Murdoch calls her own theory a kind of naturalism (SG 44). However, what she means by 'naturalism' is something different from what Moore criticised, namely the idea that Good is an object of perception within the natural world, so itself a natural property. Based on this definition, Murdoch contends that Moore himself was in spite of himself a naturalist, because he thought that Good was a real constituent of the world (SG 3).

²⁵ Remaining with Moore, the idea of vision has an intuitionist legacy, as Bagnoli points out (2012: 207-208)

essence, the unity of the Good appears rather as a matter of *relation*: good things are held together by their relationship to the idea of perfection – which Murdoch sometimes discusses with reference to the Platonic idea of the Form of the Good. The recognition of different objects as good and the perception of scales and hierarchies among good and bad objects are considered by Murdoch as facts which can be observed in everyday cognitive activity. What this activity is taken to show is the existence of an ideal that unites and organises good things.

If Good is apprehended as unitary through the perception of degrees of goodness in the world, then the good things in the world are not good in themselves, but in relation to an indefinable ideal Good. This ideal Good can be understood in two ways. First, it can be a mysterious object ‘out there’ in the world, which determines the goodness of things. In this sense, it can be compared to the way gravity makes things heavy according to their position, or, indeed, following a metaphor of Plato’s of which Murdoch is fond, to how the light of the sun can make certain things bright when illuminated. Second, the ‘relational’ unity of Good can also be understood according to a notion of the Good present not in the world but in the mind, whereby the Good is a regulative ideal according to which the human mind perceives the varying goodness of objects.

These are two different conceptions of the Good that Murdoch’s work suggests. Together with the essentialist view, they make up three ways to understand the Good: as a property of things, or as a relation, which divides between a regulative ideal provided by the mind, and an independent object according to which Good things acquire goodness. I shall consider which the correct interpretation is in the following chapter. Before doing so, other elements of the picture need to be brought in.

If we return to the observations about the perception of scales in the world, we will see that Murdoch derives from them further considerations about the Good. From the experience of perceiving good things, observing their relation to other good things, and from the sense that there is always the possibility of something better and that it is important to know what things are good and to what extent (SG 57-64), Murdoch derives not only the idea that the Good is a single object, but also its perfection, its being non representable, transcendent and necessarily real. These features, Murdoch holds, support one another as parts of the concept of the Good.

The perception of relative goodness in things, where some appear better than others, suggests, according to Murdoch, not only that there is something that unifies all these cases, but also and by the same token, that what unifies them does so in such a way that particular cases relate to the Good as to a model which they tend to but do not match (thus weakening the essentialist interpretation). The ‘degrees of reality’ argument is meant to indicate not only the unity, but also the perfection of the Good. The Good is what lies at the end of the scale – that to which observable goodness tends, but which it never reaches. The Good enables us to compare good objects, acting as standard. ‘We come to perceive scales, distances, standards ...’ (SG 61), and this perception *suggests* that there is an end-point to those scales. We see a loving action and perceive its goodness, but at the same time we relate it to the idea of perfect goodness. The Good emerges here as ‘the idea of perfection’ to which everything can be compared. Beautiful things, kind people, brave actions, all have a relation to the idea of perfection, and a certain distance from it. One can be sceptical that this is what in fact happens in our experience of the world;²⁶ as observed in §2 above, the success of the concept depends to a large extent on whether it helps the reader to understand her own experience of value. On the whole, the observations about degree of goodness appear to apply differently to two objects: the world and ourselves. In relation to the world, it is the idea that we can perceive relative goodness. But it is in relation to ourselves that the idea is more convincing and powerful: there the Good acts as the ideal guiding and providing a standard to evaluative one’s own actions and being, where one’s attempts to be good can be endlessly refined, and inspiration for such refinement is drawn from an idea of perfection. This conception of the Good as idea of perfection from which the subject can find inspiration connects with the idea of the Good as ‘magnetic centre’: the Good works in human beings primarily as source of inspiration or ‘object of attention’ which regulates consciousness and action; like Plato’s Form of the Good, Murdoch’s Good indicates an ideal and provides at the same time the desire and motivation to move toward that ideal.²⁷

²⁶ There can also be a moral discomfort about the idea that we compare good things, as if a good action (say, rescuing a drowning person) is not to be appreciated only in itself, but also with the awareness that there can be something better. However, this objection loses force if we assume that Murdoch is not talking about a conscious comparison in particular instances, and that she limits the idea of an explicit awareness to a sense of the whole of experience.

²⁷ I shall expand on this in Chapter 2§4.

The conception of the ideal needs to have a source, and Murdoch indicates that we conceive of the Good by looking at the world. Good must be real, she insists. What kind of reality the Good has is controversial and will be discussed in the next chapter; for the moment, let us understand the meaning of ‘real’ minimally, that is as opposed to what is subjectively created or projected by the individual. Murdoch holds that Good must be real for two reasons, one psychological, the other metaphysical: in the first instance, Murdoch observes, something which is not thought of as real would fail to provide real motivation, real *eros* (SG 61-2); for the same reason, the ‘magnetic centre’ must also be perfect, because the thought of mere slight improvement cannot play the same inspiring and motivating role: ‘the idea of perfection moves, and possibly changes, us (as artist, worker, agent) because it inspires love in the part of us that is most worthy. One cannot feel unmixed love for a mediocre moral standard’ (SG 62). The metaphysical reason for the reality of the Good lies in the fact that, because everything is perceived in relation to the idea of perfection, and because all of our actions and thoughts are in relation to it, then the Good is that without which nothing can be thought. To construct this argument, Murdoch adapts Anselm’s Proof (as we shall see in Chapter 2§2).

To sum up: by looking at the world we discern various good things, but only good to a degree, and from those we infer the idea of perfection, i.e. the Good. Thus inferred, we also take the Good to be something real and not imagined. The idea of the Good or perfection that we form and re-form, constantly, by confronting the world, also shapes our thought and behaviour – on the Platonic assumption that every person aims at the Good, whatever they conceive that to be.²⁸

The idea that Good is the standard of perfection against which all things measure indicates that Good is not itself an object among others. The Good is understood by Murdoch as the standard of perfection suggested by experience, but not itself an object of experience (SG 60). This leads us to consider the two remaining interrelated characteristics attributed by Murdoch to the Good: its being transcendent and its being indefinable. The former implies the latter: if Good is not something that can be observed, it also cannot be described. All we can say about the Good is that it is perfect and, through the Good things in the world, we can see the *direction* in which it lies.

²⁸ Cf. for ex. *Meno* 77a-87c, *Gorgias* 466a-468e and *Symposium* 204e-206a.

To say that the Good is transcendent is to place the Good beyond experience. Hence, the earlier suggestion that Good is manifest in the world seems to clash with the Good's transcendence. However, Murdoch's concept of transcendence is idiosyncratic. First, Murdoch talks about reality as being transcendent because it lies beyond one's self (SG 58-9).²⁹ In this sense, all reality 'transcends' us, and so does the Good. According to this conception, the meaning of transcendence is, in a sense, upturned: what is transcendent is not outside the world, but it is the world. The idea that reality transcends us is important and needs to be understood on the background of Murdoch's moral psychology and her conception of knowledge, where we see clearly how metaphysics and morals are intertwined: the world, according to Murdoch, is accessible to the subject not immediately, but through effort, and specifically moral effort. Knowledge as well as perception are, according to Murdoch, not ways of taking in a reality which is given to us 'on a plate' (MGM 215), but ways of 'grasping' that reality (TL 40): ordering, making sense, giving shape... in short, conceptualising. Murdoch attributes this activity to the faculty of the imagination, which can be understood as the personal and evaluative component of perception and understanding.³⁰ This world-grasping activity is moral because it depends on our values (individual, social, or human) which, according to Murdoch, structure the whole of consciousness. Morality, then, is something that is at play all the time: 'morality ... is right up against the world, to do with all apprehensions of others, all lonely reveries, all uses of time' (MGM 324). Because reality is transcendent, knowledge and perception are ways of actively reaching out to it.

To claim that consciousness grasps or gives shape to reality in order to make sense of it is not, importantly, to deny that there are correct and incorrect ways of doing so. Indeed, the moral effort inherent in cognition consists in trying to grasp reality correctly, being guided by the desire to do justice to the object, and at the

²⁹ See also MGM 498: '...“transcendence”, a word that I have used to mean a good “going beyond” one's egoistic self ...'

³⁰ See MGM Chapter 11. Murdoch regards the activity of the imagination as fundamental to all thought and perception, praising Kant for seeing this, but then distancing herself from him because he separates imagination from morality. Murdoch defines the imagination as 'a type of reflection on people, events ... which builds detail, adds colour, conjures up *possibilities* in ways which go beyond what could be said to be strictly factual' which is also 'a sort of personal exploring' (DPR 48).

same time shedding, as much as possible,³¹ any distorting influence.³² Concepts, therefore, are not ways of mirroring the world, but creative tools for making the world available to us. As such, they can be instruments of truth and knowledge, as well as of falsehood and fantasy, and of various possibilities between the two. Being shaped by the imagination, concepts are also not only public and static, but to an extent personal and idiosyncratic: what they mean and reveal to us is constantly changing, in sync with the changes in our consciousness, including our experiences and our changing understanding of the reality they refer to. Concepts are mobile and can be ‘deepened’.

On this picture, it becomes clearer why Murdoch connects transcendence with realism (SG 59) and why she stresses that her concept of reality is normative (SG 40). If the world is not just given in perception, but coming to see it as it is involves the moral effort of properly using the imagination, then two important considerations follow. One is that correct perception is a moral achievement, and so the concept of reality itself is not a matter of morally neutral description, but a normative concept describing something that we ought to be constantly trying to grasp. This also means, secondly, that reality thus understood is something that transcends us both epistemically and morally, and that the distance between ourselves and the world can only be bridged by degrees and with moral effort.³³

If reality transcends us in the way described, and if concepts have such depth, then the Good, as itself something real, is also transcendent like everything else. However, as we have seen, the Good is not an object like any other for Murdoch. Rather than being an object of direct perception, the Good cannot itself be perceived, but is suggested or implied by what is perceived. The impossibility of grasping the Good relates to its very nature as a standard of perfection or, in other words, an *ideal*: an Idea or Form, the nature of which is not to be an object among

³¹ That it is hardly ever possible for human beings to have an unbiased, non-egocentric, undistorted view of the world is for Murdoch the meaning of the idea of the fall and original sin (SG 28). See Forsberg (2015) for a more sophisticated account of original sin than I can provide here.

³² As we shall see in Ch.3§2 and in more detail in Ch.6, what distorts perception is primarily, for Murdoch, the ego, which is responsible for the creation of consoling or gratifying pictures of the world.

³³ While in MGM more space is given to the operations of consciousness as summarised above, in SG Murdoch seems more uncertain about whether all of reality transcends us in this way. Throughout, she is specifically concerned with morality, which she relates to people and human situations, as being of such complex nature that it is ‘infinitely receding’. She admits, however, the possibility that all reality and all the concepts used to grasp it are of this kind, ‘concrete universals’ which can always be deepened and improved (SG 29-30).

others, but ‘a source of energy’ and an organising principle. We know about the Good because of the role that it plays in shaping and ordering our perception and concepts about various instances of good things. These observations can lead to the conclusion that the transcendence of the Good is of a different kind from the transcendence of the world, and indeed Murdoch indicates that Good is a *sui generis* concept; however, no other meaning of transcendence is to be found in Murdoch and, importantly, she denies that there exists an ‘elsewhere’ to which this other transcendence could relate. If, as Murdoch emphatically claims, the Good is part of the world (because there *is* no other world, and any meaning to life must be found within life), then the Good transcends us as individuals, but does not transcend the world. It seems plausible to conclude that the difference in transcendence between the Good and other objects is quantitative. The Good is transcendent, on the one hand, to a greater *degree* than other objects: Murdoch always refers to the Good’s *distance* (cf. for ex. SG 31, MGM 178), never to its absence. From this perspective, Good is transcendent in a way similar to how other people, objects and situations in reality are transcendent, something which we can only perceive and understand progressively and through moral effort. Good is, however, also different from any other object because – as the standard of perfection – it cannot be an object of direct perception, however imperfect: ‘it is in its nature that we cannot get it taped ... it lies always beyond’ (SG 62). The specific transcendence of the Good, then, seems also to lie in the Good’s ideal nature, resulting in elusiveness in perception and definition.

Thus far, Murdoch’s concept of the Good appears to refer to something real, however transcendent, which is also a standard or ideal in relation to which we understand the value of any object. This can be understood, as we have seen, either as an ideal specification of a property which is variously instantiated, or as an object of comparison against which objects are measured but which is not possessed by them. To complicate matters further, the observations introduced above regarding the evaluative nature of consciousness are grounded, according to Murdoch, in the fact that we have a constant ‘orientation’ – of various kinds and degrees – to the Good. In other words, the way we perceive reality through the imagination depends on our values which, in turn, are structured according to our understanding of the Good. The Good is then the standard according to which consciousness organises itself: a transcendental condition for cognition. This leaves us with three ways of

understanding the Good, as a real but transcendent object intuited in perception: i) a standard external to the mind, according to which objects are evaluated; ii) a property variously present in those objects; iii) a transcendental condition of consciousness.

Interestingly, the considerations Murdoch puts forward in relation to the transcendental nature of the Good are the same as those that are meant to prove its necessary reality. As we have seen, Murdoch argues for her picture of the Good from the bottom up, by pointing out features of our experience of good things and invoking the Good as that which such experience seems to presuppose. There is one experience that Murdoch regards as fundamental: the ubiquitous perception of value and scales of value. The experience – as we saw in relation to the reality of the Good – has two elements, the first focusing on the objects of perception, the second on the nature of perception itself. On the one hand, the fact that we perceive goodness in things, as well as the fact that we are aware of scales within such perceptions, points to the existence of the Good as a standard of perfection. On the other hand, the fact that such awareness of the presence of value and of relative goodness appears as a constant feature of human consciousness, without which consciousness itself would be unrecognisable, is taken by Murdoch to indicate that Good is a transcendental condition of consciousness.³⁴ The co-existence of these two apparently irreconcilable conceptions of the Good is the heart of the problem of Murdoch's metaphysics, which needs to be resolved in order to ground her view of moral perception. If Good is a transcendental condition of experience, it is part of the structure of the mind, and not an object in the world; on the other hand, if Good is something real and in the world, how does it act as necessary structure of the mind, and how would we be able to distinguish between what is real and what is part of our mental structure?

Conclusions

The first part of this chapter has provided the methodological tools to understand Murdoch's argument about morality derived from observations of ordinary moral experience. Two of the central elements of Murdoch's thought are the presence of

³⁴ While the ubiquity of valuing plays a more important role in MGM, the observation about degrees of goodness is introduced in SG and used, also in MGM, to argue for the other attributes of the Good, namely its perfection and transcendent quality

evaluation in almost every act of cognition, and the assumption, displayed in the apprehension of moral situations and in the attempts to improve oneself, that the Good is something real, rather than mere convention or an expression of preference. The methodological remarks are meant not only to illuminate the concept of the Good, but will be relevant throughout this work.

In sketching Murdoch's conception of the Good as the central concept of her metaphysics, a number of tensions have emerged. The Good has been presented as something real, conceived of as a property of good objects, but also as the standard or ideal according to which value is measured. Further, the Good is described both as existing in the world, but also as a transcendental condition of consciousness. These tensions need to be examined further in order to understand not only Murdoch's metaphysics itself, but also how attention works and what its relevance is: whether attention is an apprehension of a transcendent idea, whether it involves apprehending the goodness of objects, or whether it is a moral attitude whereby the Good operates as a structuring element of consciousness showing things in a moral light; or whether it is possible for attention to be all of the above. In the following chapter I address these questions, by examining on the one hand the ideal nature of the Good in relation to good things in the world, and on the other its relation to the mind. The discussion will clarify, therefore, how Murdoch's framework makes it possible to justify the existence of a moral reality and to what extent that is independent of the mind. In that context, I shall delineate a picture which attempts to reconcile the apparently incompatible strands, filling in gaps left open by Murdoch while remaining faithful to the overall spirit of her thought.

Chapter 2

Moral Reality

Introduction

In this chapter I seek to address the main tensions in Murdoch's metaphysics that arose in Chapter 1. The central problem that emerged from the overview of Murdoch's metaphysics was the complex and potentially paradoxical nature of the concept of the Good, which appears to be a real object, an ideal working as transcendental condition, and also a property of things. The concern is that Murdoch's central concept might have potentially incompatible elements: a property instantiated in good things cannot at the same time be an object existing independently; and if Good is a transcendental condition, then it is part of the structure of the mind, not of the world.

The aim of this chapter is to analyse this potential difficulty in depth and to offer a viable picture which makes sense of these aspects of Murdoch's thought, and which suggests how these apparent fundamental tensions may be resolved. If successful, this will result in a form of realism about value which is able to justify the idea that morality is centred around attention as what enables the perception of value in the world. One of the clear difficulties in attempting such a task is that the tensions identified arise in part because Murdoch does not explicitly address these difficulties in her writing. Thus, whilst the analysis that follows and the suggested potential 'solution' offered in §5 below are based very clearly on Murdoch's thought, it is inevitable that a certain amount of interpretive licence regarding her position is required if the desired reconciliation is to be achieved. My aim is to present a viable and coherent picture of the relation between mind, world and value, drawing on Murdoch's thought, without presuming to give an exhaustive representation of Murdoch's philosophy itself.

1 Three Questions about the Good

In order to provide a suitable metaphysical picture on which to ground the idea of attention as central to the moral subject, I single out three questions that emerge from Murdoch's metaphysics: the link between Good and truth; the relation

between Good and value, or Good and good things in the world; and the relationship between both Good and value, and the mind.

The first question concerns the justification of Murdoch's fundamental claim that Good is connected with truth. The idea, which she inherits from Plato,³⁵ is assumed by Murdoch as obvious, so that its reasons are never fully spelled out. Is truth valuable because of the attitudes that lead individuals to it, which are recognised as virtues (selflessness, humility, courage)? In this case, it is truthfulness, rather than truth, that is considered good. Or is what makes these attitudes virtuous something inherent in truth, the idea that truth itself is a value? The latter explanation would require a justification as to how the value of truth is established, while the former makes the value of truth secondary to and dependent on the value of virtues. Since attention is the attitude or faculty that aims at truth and makes apprehension of it possible, the relation of truth with Good is crucial in explaining the centrality of attention in morality.

The importance of attention as making truth available includes its enabling the apprehension of *moral* truths, or a clear perception of moral realities. Therefore it is crucial to the idea of attention that we establish the existence of a moral reality, which can be apprehended more or less truthfully. This question can be broken down into two: first, what is the relation between the Good, considered as an ideal, and good things in the world? Second, are Good and value part of the structures of the mind, or something that is found in the world?

The second question I address, then, is about the relation of Good and good. Such relation can be understood in two ways. One possibility is that Good is a property of things, something that good things possess and that we can perceive directly. However, that would clash with Murdoch's theory of the Good as being a non-perceptible, non-definable, transcendent standard according to which things are perceived as good in varying degrees. In the latter case, Good is not a property of good objects, but rather a regulative ideal, and Good itself is not present in the world, but something that organises the world. If so, the relation between the Good and good things appears somewhat obscure, and needs to be clarified in order to understand what it is that the attentive individual is supposed to apprehend, and the process by which she does so.

³⁵ Cf. for ex. *Republic* 508a-e, 595c.

The third and last question revolves around the tension between the Good and value as transcendental conditions of consciousness, and Good and value as standards of perfection that exist independently of the human mind. The inherence of value in consciousness has important consequences for the distinction between fact and value. If all cognition is evaluative, then facts are themselves perceived on an evaluative background and the reality that is seen merely reflects one's values. As far as attention is concerned, it would be difficult to see how a faculty of moral perception would be required if the principle of morality were not part of the world but a structuring element of consciousness. Yet, also crucial to Murdoch's notion of the Good is the fact that it relates consciousness to the world. If that is so, attention can be important as the virtuous attitude of the mind, but what attention delivers is still not itself value. On the other hand, Murdoch also claims that Good exists in the world, as opposed to existing only in the mind. On this alternative, attention is not so much a virtuous attitude, valuable in itself, but is valuable in virtue of its ability to reveal a moral reality, which is moral independently of the way it is grasped. Between a transcendental idealist and a classical realist conception of the Good, I shall suggest a third way of understanding Murdoch's arguments, which maintains a notion of reality and objectivity without presupposing a perspective outside human thinking and practises.

Before addressing these questions, I provide an account of Murdoch's reinterpretation of Anselm's Ontological Proof, because that is where the metaphysical status of the Good is most openly stated by Murdoch. Looking at those arguments is helpful because Murdoch's reading of the Proof contains all the elements that we have seen to be problematic: the connection between truth and goodness, the reality of the Good and its transcendental status, and its being perceptible in the good things of the world. The three questions will then be discussed in light of the consideration brought forward there.

2 The Ontological Proof

The chapter 'The Ontological Proof' in MGM sums up the metaphysical ideas about the Good put forward by Murdoch elsewhere, and presents them again in a different light. Murdoch's reading of Anselm has been examined by Maria Antonaccio (2000), Marije Altorf (2008), and Stephen Mulhall (2007) among others, so my

presentation of it here will be limited to how it relates to the questions I am addressing.³⁶

Murdoch's main interest in the ontological argument is that it proves, according to her, not the reality of God, but the reality of the Good.³⁷ What the argument is about, she thinks, is 'the unconditional element in the structure of reason and reality', in the words of Paul Tillich which open the MGM chapter (Tillich 1951: 208). The Good, Murdoch goes on to argue, is such unconditional element. The acknowledgment of an unconditional element is seen by Murdoch to be a recurrent move in philosophy, appearing in various forms: as Plato's theory of the forms, as Descartes' own proof of God's existence, and also as Kant's categorical imperative. The unconditional, on which the Proof rests, is taken to be that which governs the whole of the world and life and without which life and the world would be unthinkable, what therefore exists necessarily, and is proven by everything that we think, see, and do. While Anselm identifies this with God, Murdoch takes that to be an unwarranted move, because all that Anselm proves in his argument is the existence of something unconditional and perfect, while all the other attributes of God are added to it. For Murdoch what is unconditional and perfect, instead, is nothing more than the idea of perfection, which is manifest in our sense that something matters, and that it matters in itself, absolutely. And that is precisely how Murdoch defines the Good: 'it is really only of the Good that we can say "it is the trial of itself and needs no other touch"' (SG 98). The absolute, Murdoch claims, is not God, but morality, which the idea of God includes, but which is more basic than God: 'what is absolute and unconditional is what each man clearly and distinctly knows in his own soul, the difference between right and

³⁶ Maria Antonaccio (2000: 123-9) reads the Ontological Proof as supporting her overall thesis that Murdoch is a 'reflexive realist', according to which the Good is grasped as an external entity which is nevertheless only accessible by consciousness reflecting on itself. Antonaccio derives her conclusion from the idea that the necessary existence of God/Good implies that God/Good is a condition of experience and therefore can only be perceived by reflecting on consciousness itself. I offer some considerations against this conclusion in §4.1.1 below. Stephen Mulhall's (2007) reading is compatible with the one I present here, although it has a different focus: in his paper, Mulhall is interested in comparing Murdoch's atheistic interpretation with Christian doctrine, arguing that Christianity can accommodate Murdoch's criticism of a personal God, and that it may also be better equipped at dealing with the presence of God/Good in the world and with the experience of meaninglessness and absence of God/Good.

³⁷ More broadly, Murdoch is seeking to explain a religious spirit in terms of morality and without recourse to a supernatural entity: 'religion is a mode of belief in the unique sovereign place of goodness or virtue in human life' (MGM 426). For one way to interpret this idea in the context of truth and attention, see §3 below.

wrong' (MGM 439). The unconditional is omnipresent, both in the world and in the individual:

[it is] inseparable from one's sense of oneself, like the Cartesian sense of one's own existence and as directly grasped. Kant is confident that we all recognise it. And the man in the street, if untainted by theory, would probably assent to both ideas, to *cogito ergo sum* and to his ability to discern right from wrong. (MGM 439)³⁸

Drawing together the world and the self (or 'soul'), the idea of the unconditional is found also in Descartes' proof of God's existence, which Murdoch sees as a direct development of Anselm's proof, the intuition of something exceeding the mind grasped by observing the mind's contents. Murdoch also believes that Plato's 'degrees of reality' argument,³⁹ which points to the existence of the Forms, coincides with her and Anselm's 'degrees of perfection' argument, which aims at establishing the existence of an endpoint to the goodness observed in the world. Similarly, Kant's Categorical Imperative is what serious reflection on the part of the individual yields as something absolute governing reason, which one needs to obey for its own sake: 'the idea of Good (goodness, virtue)', Murdoch writes, 'crystallises out of our moral activity. The concept of Good emphasises a unity of aspiration and belief concerning the absolute importance of what is done on this heterogeneous scene' (MGM 426). The unconditional reality of the Good is discovered by observing its omnipresence in reality *as well as* in the mind.

Murdoch identifies two arguments as part of Anselm's Proof: the logical and the metaphysical. The logical argument, for which Anselm is better known, has two formulations: the first is meant to show that if God, defined as 'a being than which a greater cannot be conceived' exists in the mind, it must also exist in reality, since existence in reality is greater than existence in the mind. This formulation was famously rejected by Kant, with the observation that existence is not a predicate, and therefore not something that adds to a concept, but merely posits it. Anselm seems to be trying to think something into existence, as Gaunilo reproaches him for doing, but by the same token anything could be thought into existence. The second formulation, a reply to Gaunilo, which Murdoch thinks is the fundamental move, points out that God is not like any other object: God is not something greater than anything else, but a being than which a greater cannot be conceived: a *necessarily*

³⁸ Edith Brugmans (2007) reads Murdoch's Ontological Proof as an attempt to ward off moral scepticism. Her analysis of MGM is brief, and the anti-sceptical motive is mainly examined through Murdoch's novel *An Accidental Man*.

³⁹ Cf. *Republic* 509d–511e and MGM 405–6.

existing being, whose non-existence is impossible. If such a being is conceivable, what is conceived is a being which exists necessarily.⁴⁰

At this point, one could deny that such being is conceivable. To which Anselm replies by pointing at the experience of the world, where we see that what is good is like the greatest good, and that God (perfection) is perceived in less perfect instances of her/him (MGM 394-5). This is what Murdoch calls ‘the metaphysical argument which is also an appeal to experience’ (MGM 395), an argument which she claims is a reworking of Platonic ideas (MGM 392). The appeal to less perfect instantiations of Good is for Murdoch the starting point, identified with her recurring observations about the perception of degrees of perfection in the good things of the world. From our experience of goodness in the world, Murdoch believes, we are led to imagine something better than anything, of which imperfect things participate, as in Plato’s myth of the cave. Such standard, however, does not only come to mind when confronted with something good, but in all experience, including when perceiving something that appears like a negation of the ideal. It also operates, importantly, every time we distinguish truth from falsity, when we engage with reality aiming for correct perception and judgment. In short, all perception and cognition is a relation to a standard of perfection.

According to this argument, the idea of perfection appears not as something contingent, the object of certain particular experiences, but as something that supports every cognitive activity. Perfection is what everything tends to, the standard by which everything is evaluated, and experience shows that. What follows is that i) such standard is never itself directly perceived, and that ii) it is considered to be necessary, not contingent, because it is indirectly experienced everywhere and nothing can be thought or experienced without it. This is why, Murdoch claims, the metaphysical argument urges on the logical argument, in the same way as Wittgenstein thought life could ‘force’ the concept of God on us (Wittgenstein 1980 85-6, in MGM 440). Observation of experience leads to the metaphysical claim that every cognitive activity is related to a standard, and that standard, in turn, if it is to exist at all, exists necessarily. Perfection is not an object among others. Thus the proof is one ‘from all the world’, and only the totality of

⁴⁰ A version of this argument has been constructed by Norman Malcolm (1960).

experience can testify to something which is supposed to surpass it and hold it together. The desire to know anything at all is itself a manifestation of the Good.

As Murdoch acknowledges, the ontological argument is not compelling for everyone, because it appeals not to the intellect, but to faith; Anselm's beginning is *credo ut intellegam*. One could, for instance, deny the premise that we perceive and think in terms of an unconditional standard of perfection. Here we return to the 'invitational' character of Murdoch's appeal to experience observed in Ch.1§2. Her metaphysical arguments cannot be logically or empirically proven, yet they invite the reader to notice something about life, to see it in a certain light, and if that way of seeing it illuminates and explains something about it, then it is worth pursuing. The idea of faith is invoked, by Anselm and Murdoch, not as an irrational surrender in order to make any claim one feels like making, but as an attitude of the mind bent on discovering something that it only darkly intuits. It is more akin to Plato's love or *eros*, the desire to apprehend the Forms that it does not yet see. As Simone Weil notes, 'the proof does not address itself to the understanding but to love' (2013: 375, quoted in MGM 505). Here we can note again, under another aspect, how Murdoch is practising, and inciting us to practise, philosophically, the same attitude that she holds as central to the moral life more generally: attention, as the desire to discover something that one does not yet fully comprehend, that nevertheless presents itself compellingly to consciousness.⁴¹

On Murdoch's reading, what the Proof demonstrates is that there exists something unconditional, necessary and absolute, perceived as structuring both the mind and reality – nothing less, but also nothing more. What follows, strikingly, is that God cannot be what is proven by these arguments, because God, understood as a personal God, an omnipotent and omnipresent being ('the traditional sense' of god, which according to Murdoch 'is perhaps the only sense', MGM 364-5) cannot both exist in the world (contingently) and necessarily. Following Findlay (1948, in MGM 411-2), Murdoch holds that what the Proof proves is in fact God's necessary nonexistence: God is not an entity, because as such s/he would be contingent. This, according to Murdoch, brings out the 'deep meaning' of the Proof (MGM 412): a personal deity cannot be the necessarily existing God, but God nevertheless

⁴¹ 'Credo ut intellegam (I believe in order to understand) is not just an apologist's paradox, but an idea with which we are familiar in personal relationships ... I have faith (important place for this concept) in a person or idea in order to understand him or it' (MGM 393).

symbolises something non-contingent, the ‘absolute’ or ‘unconditioned structure’, which is morality. Like God, if the Good is the absolute thus conceived, Good is also indefinable. This is important: Murdoch’s Good is, in a sense, ‘empty’, it is something to which everything points, but, not being an object in the world, it has itself no property or form that can be specified.⁴² Murdoch’s proof tells us that the Good exists and it is everywhere, but nothing more can be said about it. Nevertheless, having summarised why and how Murdoch thinks Good exists, I shall now attempt to say something about it, not in order to describe it, but in order to clarify its operation in human life and in the world, and its relation to truth.

3 Good and Truth

There is a close connection between the necessity and omnipresence of Good as shown by the proof, and the relation of Good to truth, which is another cornerstone of Murdoch’s metaphysics. ‘Truth is very close to good’ (MGM 325), Murdoch writes, but how close, and in what way? As my starting point to address this question, I take the claim that our inherent orientation to the Good is discovered in our experience of constantly distinguishing, not only what is good from what is bad, but also what is true from what is false. On closer inspection, many of the formulations of Murdoch’s transcendental view of the Good have to do with truth and truthfulness: ‘the concept of consciousness should contain the (moral) idea of truth-seeking’ (MGM 243); ‘truth ... which we are forced to attend to in all our doings, is an aspect of the unavoidable nature of morality’ (MGM 418). Murdoch takes the connection of the Good with truth from Plato, calling it ‘one of the most fruitful ideas in philosophy’ (FS 425); she also takes from Plato the image of the Good as the sun, which illuminates reality, making it visible. Good is, following this image, what inspires every act of cognition, leading it towards the truth. But every act of cognition is also a way of relating to an external reality with the aim of apprehending it truthfully. Truth and Good share the fact that every activity of the mind involves a movement toward or away from them.

However, like the sun in the Platonic image, the Good is the source of inspiration of cognition, but not itself an object of apprehension. What the sun does

⁴² Murdoch, however, does not like to attribute emptiness to the Good, preferring to call it ‘mysterious’ (SG 99). What I mean here by ‘empty’ is what Murdoch often emphasises, the impossibility of attributing any property to the Good.

is shed light on reality, making apprehension of it possible: so the Good makes it possible to apprehend individual truths. It then becomes clear that truth is not the same as the Good: the apprehension of truth is *dependent* on the Good, insofar as the Good is what structures and embraces the whole of reality, including the mind in its search for truth. This is how Plato puts it in the *Republic*:

This reality, then, that gives their truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower, you must say is the idea of good, and you must conceive it as being the cause of knowledge, and of truth in so far as known. (*Republic* 508e)

The value of reality, truth and knowledge in Murdoch's philosophy is often assumed ('it was assumed that it is better to know the truth than to remain in a state of illusion', SG 64) and much is often implicitly made to depend on it, even though it is one of the most difficult and deepest parts of her system. My attempt to shed light on the issue will proceed by offering three different aspects under which to see truth as related to Good: a psychological, a metaphysical or mystical, and an instrumental aspect.

First, what I call the psychological aspect. As has been observed, Murdoch relates truth and goodness by claiming that the same attitudes and faculties are required for both (SG 64).⁴³ A good person is also better able to see clearly, and truthfulness is a fundamental virtue: 'truthfulness, the search for truth, for a closer connection between thought and reality, demands and effects an exercise of virtues and a purification of desire' (MGM 399).⁴⁴ Probably inspired by Weil, Murdoch frequently claims that *all* intellectual activities, such as learning a language or working on a mathematical problem, are moral exercises: the same attitudes and virtues are required. The ability to grasp the truth in studies, art, everyday morality, is considered to depend on one's moral qualities, primarily one's ability to attend.⁴⁵

Two caveats: it need not follow that the erudite is the exemplar of the good person, truthfulness being here better understood as an 'imaginative grasp' rather than 'rational survey or ability to learn' (MGM 324), in line with Murdoch's overall theory of knowledge, whereby "'Truth" is not just a collection of facts' (MGM

⁴³ Cf. for ex. Robjant (2011a: 996).

⁴⁴ Cf. Simone Weil: 'love of truth is always accompanied by humility' (1962: 25).

⁴⁵ These examples follow closely on Simone Weil's reflections in RRSS.

399).⁴⁶ It also does not follow that the person who can in some cases grasp truth very well (a good artist, for example) is a good person overall, since, as Murdoch is keen to emphasise, ‘in morality we tend to specialise’ (MGM 87, 323, 291).⁴⁷ Specialised truth-seeking can, nevertheless, serve as a useful training as well as a model for virtue.

Why is virtue *required* for correct understanding? The answer depends on Murdoch’s conception of knowledge and of the activity of conceptualising. In her view, as we saw, we apprehend the world through a conceptualising activity which is itself determined by the individual’s concerns, desires, character traits... Perception is then the expression of the individual’s moral character and values. If reality is not given to perception immediately and impersonally, but is known by the individual through continuous *moral* effort, it follows that successful knowledge of reality coincides with virtuous consciousness: ‘a good quality of consciousness is the continual discrimination of true and false’ (MGM 250). What makes perception more accurate and allows us to ‘see more’ is nothing but virtue, including the desire to perceive things as they are (Murdoch often calls it *eros*) – to do them *justice*, concomitantly with the suppression of the distorting influence of the egoistic drives (‘unselfing’):⁴⁸ all this resolves itself in the exercise of attention.⁴⁹ Given the ‘degrees of reality’ argument, and the conclusion that Good is what structures the whole of reality, we can say that the virtuous (attentive) consciousness desires the Good (as Plato’s *eros* does), and thus orients itself towards it, thereby discovering what is real.

⁴⁶ Murdoch is not suggesting that we turn into the characters of Flaubert’s novel *Bouvard and Pecuchet*, which in fact exposes the dangers, including the moral dangers, of pursuing knowledge taken as an inert ‘collection of facts’. Nor should a more discursive ability to grasp reality be preferred over an instinctive grasp of it, or the latter to the former. It is also not obvious that the two can be clearly distinguished (cf. MGM 324).

⁴⁷ Murdoch makes this claim despite the argument about the unity of the virtues. The two can be reconciled by taking virtues to be mutually dependent when they are exercised, but not necessarily always present consistently in an individual.

⁴⁸ Genevieve Lloyd (1982) argues that this is where the value of truth rests for Murdoch; Lloyd contrasts the value of truth as residing in the self-transcendence of truthful perception with both the idea that there is something valuable ‘out there’ independently of the mind, and with the idea that value is in the mere effort to see clearly. Although I agree with her on both points, her claim that truth is valuable only because of the self-transcendence it requires looks dangerously similar to the second alternative she rejects. For truthful perception to be valuable, as we shall see, more than the value of a truthful attitude seems to be required.

⁴⁹ Murdoch describes moral perception thus: ‘all *just* vision ... is a moral matter... the same virtue (love) [is] required throughout and fantasy (self) can prevent us from seeing a blade of grass just as it can prevent us from seeing another person’ (SG 70).

The desire for perceiving reality correctly is then the same as the desire for the Good, insofar as they involve the same mental attitudes and activities. The orientation to the Good involves turning the mind away from the distorting ego to something external, facilitating the grasp of what is true. The desire to be good to someone, for example, will make one turn one's focus away from oneself and towards the person, in an attempt to see them clearly. The search for truth and for Good are in lockstep: being moved by Good (or 'purifying one's energy through attention to the Good') coincides with correct perception of the other, understandable in relation to the idea of doing them justice, which is nothing but seeing them as they are. Thus, Murdoch holds, following Weil, that justice is the same as love: loving another person, looking at them being animated by the desire for the Good, is incompatible with harbouring illusions about them (See Ch.4§2). The Good is the sun which makes reality visible.

An impression of circularity is formed: it may appear that what makes truth morally desirable is not to do with truth itself, but with the attitudes through which truth is known (selflessness, attention, justice etc.). That what is valuable is not truth, but truthfulness. However, truthfulness and the related virtues are, at least in part, considered virtuous precisely because they are conducive to clearer vision and apprehension of the truth, which depends on the Good. The question to be addressed is then: Is there anything valuable in truth as such? The question can also be posed the other way around: why does orientation toward the Good, or desire for the Good, make reality available to the subject? (Or again, to use Murdoch's phrase in SG 103: why does love become just by going to its object *via the Good*?). Both attention – as the central truth-discovering attitude or faculty – and the Good make truth available to the subject, but in different ways: while attention relates to our psychological ability to perceive reality, the Good is linked with truth metaphysically. Attention itself involves a desire for the Good, which is *also* a desire for truth, yet Good is primary over truth; it is still therefore necessary to explain how truth depends on the Good.

Part of what the Ontological Proof does, in Murdoch's formulation, is to provide us with a sense of the close connection between Good and truth. I call this the metaphysical aspect of the question. In Anselm, as in Descartes and Plato, Murdoch discovers a similar 'cognitive moral vision' which 'unites all knowledge as God-discovering activity whereby all truth reveals him' (MGM 444). As noted

above, the idea of the Good is discovered by looking both at the world and at the mind as engaged with the world, and not at single instances of cognitive activity, but at the whole of thinking, which is discovered as being in constant engagement with reality. Every question of value is at the same time a question of truth, because value is seen to underlie the whole of thinking, perceiving and feeling – all of the relations of the individual with the world. With the Proof, Murdoch finds something of ultimate value in reality, the standard to which all acts of the mind – which are necessarily acts of engaging with reality – are seen to relate. The idea of totality is important here: Good is discovered in all experience, all reality.

There are three ways in which the metaphysical idea of the omnipresence of the Good in reality can be understood. First is the idea that every single object or event is good insofar as it is real. While this thought can be found in Weil, in the context of a Christian metaphysics according to which everything is good insofar as it is God's creation, Murdoch does not make such claims. The idea that everything is good, although understandable in a religious context,⁵⁰ is very difficult to justify, including as it does the idea that things like murder and hatred are good. A formulation of the metaphysical aspect of the relation of truth and Good which is less problematic and more easily attributable to Murdoch concerns the value of existence itself, which is manifest, on the one hand (and secondly), as awe at the existence of the world as a whole, and on the other (thirdly), as awe at the existence of any individual thing. These two aspects are intertwined, since the apprehension of the Good in the whole of experience, which suggests the necessary reality of Good, is in turn built up through various particular instances of cognition. Nevertheless, it is the experience of the ubiquity of Good in the whole of reality, and therefore in truth itself, that is central for Murdoch. This aspect of the connection between Good and truth can also be called *mystical*, similarly to the notion of mysticism to be found in *Tractatus* 6.44, as a sense of the totality of life and experience: 'not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystical' (quoted in SG 85). Murdoch finds absolute meaning in the very existence of the world and in

⁵⁰ Chappell (2014: 311) suggests that this is indeed a possible way of understanding Murdoch, although in his presentation this idea converges with the value of the world as a whole, exemplified in Father Zossima's exhortation in *The Brothers Karamazov*: 'love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things' (Dostoevsky 1952: 167, quoted in Chappell 2014: 311).

reality itself, which leads her to conceive of the source of meaning and value as embracing everything. The value of truth is implicit in the whole idea of Good as the necessary element of reality: if Good is ubiquitous, the intuition of the Good takes the form of a ‘Yea saying’ to life and the world.⁵¹ Conversely, illusion is a turning away from the world, a ‘Nay saying’ that negates the absolute Good at the same time. What this conception establishes is the value of truth as an inherent aspect of the orientation to the Good, the reaching out of the mind to the world.

Lastly, if the Good is the light that makes reality visible, it follows that the moral relevance of reality is also revealed by the Good. This is the instrumental aspect of the value of truth: seeing things as they are enables a correct *moral* understanding. This idea can be understood in two ways, depending on the conception of the reality of value endorsed: on the one hand, for the anti-realist, correct apprehension of non-moral facts enables sound moral judgment by making the correct application of principles possible; on the other hand, for the moral realist, correct apprehension of facts includes correct apprehension of moral facts.

Although I have yet to address the question of whether morality can be consistently both a matter of how one sees the world, as well as something that exists within the properties of the world,⁵² Murdoch seems committed to both, so it is the second kind of instrumental value of truth that is relevant here: if there are moral facts in the world, and if the Good reveals truth, then part of what Good reveals is moral truth. If that is the case, it will take a good (attentive, or Good-inspired, Good-desiring) quality of consciousness to perceive things as they are, including their moral character. Thus, the possibility to perceive the moral features of the world makes truth valuable because, if reality contains moral features, perceiving reality correctly will also enable the perceiver to apprehend its moral character. This is the most straightforward aspect of the value of truth among those presented so far. If there is a moral reality, and if it can be perceived by the truth-seeking faculty/attitude I call attention, then this aspect of the value of truth places yet another kind of importance, and of a very significant kind, on attention as a

⁵¹ Almost a Nietzschean affirmation, but without the notion of *amor fati*. The idea is concisely expressed in a poem by Constantine Cavafy, ‘Che Fece ... Il Gran Rifiuto’ (1975).

⁵² To anticipate, in favour of the existence of moral facts, the following considerations can be offered: if Good is the absolute element in the mind and the world, then things in the world are more or less good too, insofar as they are ‘oriented’ to it, or participate in it. As Murdoch repeatedly stresses through the ‘degree of reality/degrees of goodness’ argument, the world – reality – contains things, people and situations that are good and others that are less so.

moral concept (which I discuss in relation to moral perception in Chapter 5). This question – crucial to understanding what the Good and morality are – hinges on whether Murdoch can be consistently conceived as a moral realist.

4 The Problem: Mind or World?

The nature of the Good and therefore of value constitutes the central interpretative difficulty of Murdoch's metaphysics. There is a tension between two apparently opposed views of the nature of morality. The Good is presented, on the one hand, as a transcendental condition and thus part of the structures of the human mind; on the other, it is said to be found in the world, to be real and out there. Although Good and value are not the same, as we shall see, Murdoch presents value along the same lines. The question can be framed as a choice between transcendental idealism and classical realism. In this section I intend to show how neither theory entirely fits Murdoch, but that she reframes the very question about the nature of Good and value by radically reconceiving the nature of reality and cognition. Offering a different conceptualisation of consciousness and reality, the solution I propose after this section combines the evaluative nature of consciousness with the reality of value, therefore justifying the importance of attention both in terms of what it discloses, and in terms of the value of attending.

The question of the nature of the Good needs to be distinguished, before we proceed, from the question of the nature of value. Discussions of Murdoch's moral philosophy generally fail to make this distinction, and this is partly due to the fact that Murdoch herself sometimes uses 'Good' and 'value' interchangeably. However, the distinction is of crucial importance: what characterises the Good is that it is an ideal and implicit in every act of cognition; however, since Murdoch does not claim that every person is perfectly good and with perfect understanding of the ideal, nor that everything is good, the relation or orientation to the Good must be present only imperfectly and by degrees, both in moral subjects, as well as in things and states of affair. That is what, I suggest, can be called value: the various understandings of the Good and degrees of goodness that are found in people, things, and situations. In the case of human beings, what we all possess, Murdoch claims, is not the Good itself, or a perfect understanding thereof, but an *orientation* to the Good. This orientation is the individual's sense of value.

So the question about the reality of the Good needs to be differentiated from the question about the reality of value. However, since the Good is the source of value, the same *kind* of question is addressed to both. The question concerns the degree to which Good and value are dependent on the mind, or whether they can be considered mind-independent. With the Good, the tension is between a regulative ideal and something that exists in reality as a property of things; with value, the tension is between a transcendental condition – determined by the Good – and the objective existence of value, in the form of moral facts or truths. It is the latter that concerns us more here, in relation to the way in which an attentive subject encounters the world, and whether attention makes it possible to disclose a moral reality. At the same time, if attention is a particular mode of cognition, which is determined by value, which is in turn an orientation to the Good, then attention itself depends on apprehension of the Good.

4.1 The Reality of the Good

The Good in Murdoch appears torn between being a regulative ideal and being part of empirical reality. In the previous chapter we saw that Murdoch also defines the Good as transcendent; yet that does not need to point to a third categorisation of it, because for Murdoch transcendent does not mean ‘elsewhere’, but beyond the subject’s immediate grasp. The Good is conceived as infinitely distant, rather than absent. That allows Murdoch to place Good within reality, while at the same time maintaining its indefinable and ideal status. Murdoch expresses this thought by putting Kant and Plato side by side: Good is transcendent because infinitely distant and never fully seen (Plato), but it is also ‘here’, operating in our every thought and action, available by degrees to anyone who seriously looks for it (Kant) (cf. MGM 178). Although Kant’s view is more ‘democratic’ and Plato’s ‘aristocratic’, as Murdoch puts it, the difference lies in the degree of distance, or the difficulty of grasping the Good, not in the Good’s nature or ‘location’ (MGM 178). Thus we can combine Murdoch’s claims about the transcendence of the Good with her idea that there is no ‘elsewhere’.

But we are still talking in metaphors. Despite Murdoch’s stress on the depth and indispensability of metaphors, what does it mean that Good is distant but here? It is not a physical location that Good occupies. The distance, as presented above, refers to the difficulty – in fact, the impossibility – of getting a clear idea of what

the Good is, and of its being perfectly instantiated in something. That is because the Good is an *ideal* or Idea, by its very nature not something that can even be fully instantiated in something observable. Its very nature is to be what Murdoch thinks the Forms are, ‘*essentially* objects of love’ (MGM 146): the Good manifests itself in the way it inspires the mind and organises the world. As something absolute or unconditional, the Good is ‘the unconditional element in the structure of reason and reality’ (MGM 391). Good structures reason *and* reality – this is a clue that can help to answer one of the questions set in this section, about whether Good is part of the structure of the mind or it is in the world. The Good, understood as the absolute or unconditional element in mind and reality, needs to be divided between its role in the human mind, and in the rest of the world. With regards to the world (objects and states of affairs), the relation to the Good depends on the extent to which things resemble the ideal. In relation to the mind, the role of the Good is to structure thought and perception and provide motivation.

4.1.1 Good and the Mind

Let us start with the role of the Good in relation to the mind. (I discuss the relation of Good and world in §4.1.2 below). For human beings, Murdoch’s Good, like Plato’s Form of the Good, provides ‘energy’ and a ‘sense of direction’ – one through the other. By being conceived as the idea of perfection, the Good motivates us to try to get closer to it (on the assumption that we want whatever we think is good), and by doing so, it also provides the structure of value through which will and imagination organise perceptions and thoughts. Described in this way, the Good seems to be a *regulative ideal*, part of the structure of the mind, through which the mind orders reality.⁵³ The proof of the reality of the Good is in its effects, the way in which it motivates us and influences us. Whatever does this, Murdoch argues (with a nod to Keats, Weil and Valery – cf. MGM 506), must be real.

This last observation introduces an element of uncertainty in the conception of the Good as only a regulative ideal. It suggests that Good works as a regulative ideal precisely because it is more than that – something real and ‘out there’. If it were not thus real, it would have no such effect. ‘Out there’ does not mean that it exists in any ‘heavily material sense’ (MGM 146), but as something ungraspable and absolute. Good is real ‘as an Idea’ (MGM 508). Murdoch’s point is that we

⁵³ Ana Lita thinks that the Good is precisely this (Lita 2003: 172, endnote 8).

experience the Good as something that governs the whole of reality and, in the absence of any proof to the contrary, that experience needs to be taken seriously. As Anthony Rudd notes, the phenomenology of the Good suggests something more than a regulative ideal: ‘good is not an idea we project towards the end of the road; it is what is already there, pulling us towards it’ (Rudd 2012: 158). However, if the idea of the Good is something that structures the whole of human consciousness, it is impossible to say whether it is ‘out there’ or only something in terms of which we see everything. Yet our experience, Murdoch claims, suggests that it is out there.

Maria Antonaccio has famously tried to reconcile the reality of the Good and its being part of the workings of the mind by attributing to Murdoch a view which she calls ‘reflexive realism’, a reading that has almost become standard.⁵⁴ According to the reflexive realist reading, ‘the Good is discovered through the medium of consciousness as it reflects on itself; yet at the same time, the act of reflexivity reveals the Good to be a perfection or “higher condition” that transcends or surpasses consciousness’ (2000: 119).⁵⁵ Antonaccio’s proposed reading can be attractive because it accommodates the idea that the necessity of the Good is grasped (following Anselm as well as, in their own ways, Descartes and Kant) by the individual and inwardly, ‘in one’s own bosom’. Thus Antonaccio finds support in Charles Taylor’s idea of ‘inwardness’ as a modern form of moral consciousness. Taylor (1989) sees the move to inwardness in the transition between Plato’s and Augustine’s views of the Good, the latter being taken as the first and emblematic ‘reflexive’ thinker.⁵⁶ For Antonaccio, Murdoch is akin to Plato in positing the Good as something real and external to the individual, but also akin to Anselm in seeing the Good as being grasped reflexively, where self-consciousness is correlative to Good (2000: 126).

While it is certainly true that Murdoch draws attention to the operations of consciousness in the Proof and talks of orientation to the Good as a transcendental condition of consciousness, what the reflexivity of the Proof yields is not so much an apprehension of the Good itself, but an understanding of its necessity and

⁵⁴ ‘Reflexive realism’ comes from theology and William Schweiker (Antonaccio 2000: 197, fn. 35). See also Heather Widdows (2006), who espouses a view very similar to Antonaccio’s.

⁵⁵ The idea of reflexive realism is central in Antonaccio (2000) and in her more recent (2012b). The exposition of the ontological argument as supporting reflexive realism, in particular, can be found in Antonaccio (2000: 123-9), and in Antonaccio (2012b: 110-4).

⁵⁶ Taylor (1992: 136-9).

omnipresence. In fact, the starting point of the Proof lies in everyday perception, which already includes (necessarily partial) perceptions of the Good in the world. But the Proof as a whole is a *philosophical* argument to demonstrate, not just the Good, but the necessary reality of the idea of Good.⁵⁷ By observing consciousness, what we become acquainted with is not so much the Good – that is perceived in the world – but with the ubiquity of value, the way Good works *in us*. Reflexivity may convince a philosophically inclined person that Good is real and everywhere, and if it does help morally it is by showing the individual her own relationship with the Good, but not the Good itself. Therefore, while Antonaccio's proposition is attractive, its emphasis on the necessary correlation of consciousness and Good fails to account for the reality of the Good which is grasped, as opposed to what reflexivity suggests, when consciousness is directed away from itself and to the world. The Good is also (partially) accessible to the unreflective yet virtuous individual (the notorious 'virtuous peasant', SG 2), who attends to the reality *outside* her mind.

Murdoch's appeal to experience is an attempt to demonstrate that Good exists, as an indefinable and transcendent ideal, but objectively. What remains yet to be explained is how *value*, conceived as the relation of the individual to the Good, and as the manifestation of Good in the world, can be objective and real. I shall start with the second question: how Good relates to value in the world, or good things with a small 'g'; having considered the existence of value in the world, I shall then move on to address the issue of whether an inherently evaluating mind can be said to genuinely discover value outside itself.

4.1.2 Good and good

The Proof hints at, but does not specify, the nature of the relation between the Good and good things in the world. Murdoch's argument starts from the observation that Good is conceived as real by observing good things in the world, and that there is a unity to good things, but how does the Good relate to the perceptible moral properties? This question needs to be answered in order to clarify the nature of the value that attention is supposed to apprehend. We have seen that, for Murdoch, Good is an ideal, not something that can ever be fully grasped in perception, but at

⁵⁷ As Marije Altorf (2008: 98) notes, although she does not follow up this idea to explore the consequences. Cf. MGM 428.

the same time it is constantly suggested by every act of perception as being 'there' in the world. The nature of this 'suggestion' is at stake: Good can be either a property imperfectly instantiated in good things, or something that is not there at all, but somehow related to objects and situations. How to spell out this relation is, as Murdoch recognises, a difficult and crucial problem: 'one of the great problems of metaphysics is to explain the idea of goodness in terms which combine its peculiar purity and separateness (its transcendence) with details of its omnipresent effectiveness in human life' (MGM 408).

For clarity, I distinguish between the Good with a capital 'G', or the idea of perfection, and good with a small 'g', or particular value properties. Good, as the idea of perfection, is suggested by the things of the world, but it is never itself seen. The ideal, invisible and indefinable nature of the Good warns against taking it as a property of things. The Good is also, for this reason, defined by Murdoch as transcendent, something that governs the whole of reality but is not itself part of what we can perceive. Good things with a small 'g', on the other hand, are the objects of perception which indicate the existence of the Good and which we understand using thick concepts: kind things, generous things, etc.

Murdoch claims that the Good is present both in the soul and in the world. This requires a distinction, as we saw, between the role of the Good in relation to the soul or mind, and in relation to the world: in relation to the mind of individuals, Good is the standard at which we aim in our understanding of reality; in relation to the world, Good represents the standard of perfection that is suggested by every instance of goodness, but never itself seen. Good in the world and Good in the mind stand in circular relation: the more one grasps good things in the world, the clearer one's conception of the Good, and the clearer one's conception of the Good, the easier to discern good things in the world – their relationship of things to one another and to the ideal. This is how Murdoch tries combine the intuition that 'some things really are better than others' with the idea that 'we see the world in light of the Good' (SG 97-8).

How is the Good, then, 'suggested' or 'intimated' by good things? As we saw, the simplest solution would be to claim that Good is a property of things, a common essence shared by things, people, and situations that we can rightly call good. This interpretation is problematic for a number of reasons: first, the fact that the relation of the Good to the mind is not the same as its relation to the world,

because the ideal cannot have the same ‘magnetic’ force on inanimate matter, suggests that Good cannot be the same essence in everything. Secondly, there are Murdoch’s repeated injunctions about the impossibility of directly perceiving or defining the Good. As Murdoch claims, when we look at the world we see little that is good, and nothing that is perfectly good (SG 61). Thirdly, and related to this, is Murdoch’s recommendation that when we talk about the world we use secondary or thick concepts, because the thin Good refers to perfection, which is never fully instantiated, and is therefore ill adapted to describe particulars.

These are the reasons to read Murdoch as presenting an anti-essentialist picture about value and the Good.⁵⁸ What we do perceive in the world are particular value properties, not the Good itself. As we saw in Chapter 1, however, value properties are connected to each other through the Good. If the connection is not represented by a common essence, it must lie elsewhere. What we perceive in reality, by perceiving particular values, are degrees of perfection, suggesting that something could be better, and a sense of the direction in which improvement lies. Good is what one would see if the goodness perceived in particular objects were increased ad infinitum and abstracted from any particular, the idea to which any ‘good’ thing tends. But, for that very reason, it is not something which it is in fact possible to perceive. The Good itself is not to be found in any object or situation, because it encompasses the totality of goodness in abstraction from particulars, as the Proof shows, by appealing to the totality of experience. If the Good is conceived as a property of things, it is not such that it can be found, complete, within things, like a common essence, but a various and partial manifestation.

The Platonic image of the Good as the sun can be used to clarify this relation. Murdoch writes: ‘[the sun] is real, it is out there, but very distant. It gives light and energy and enables us to know the truth. In its light we see the things of the world in their true relationship’ (SG 92). The sun is the source of vision, not itself seen, so it is not an object of perception among others. We can see that the Good is, by the same token, not a property of things, if we consider that what the sun does is provide light so that things are seen as they are and in their true relations, but light

⁵⁸ Murdoch’s Platonic inheritance, although it has been taken as a reason to read Murdoch as an essentialist, can in fact be a reason to support the opposite conclusion. For an anti-essentialist reading of Plato in relation to the concept of virtue, see Rowett (2013). Murdoch herself declares to be against an essentialist interpretation of Plato (by Don Cupitt) in MGM 455.

is not a property of the things that are illuminated.⁵⁹ The sun, like the Good, has a dual function: it makes it possible for us to see things rightly, if we orient ourselves to it – by coming out of the cave, and not looking the other way, which Murdoch equates, respectively, with attention and self-concern; and it also sheds light upon the world, illuminating some things more, others less, others not at all. This second aspect of the sun is helpful in understanding the relation of Good with good things: like the light of the sun, which shines differently on different objects, while the objects do not themselves contain light (or, following the analogy used in Chapter 1, like gravity provides objects with various weights, without being a property of the objects), so the Good, besides allowing us to see things as they are, also provides value to things, in various degrees and according to the particular objects' properties.

The analogy of the sun and light also shows more clearly the importance of using thick concepts for describing good things, which unite the moral and the descriptive, as opposed to thin ones, as Murdoch suggests (SG 42):⁶⁰ just like objects have different colours depending on their own properties, but also on whether and how they are illuminated, so individual instances of generosity, care, etc. have various properties which partly determine the particular concept used, but the evaluative nature of the concepts also depends on the closeness of the objects to the ideal of perfection.⁶¹

This understanding of the relation between the Good and good things has important consequences for what it takes to perceive value: on this view, the faculty required for perceiving the particular situations and their moral qualities has to be attuned both to the ideal – which makes values what they are – and to the particular reality. Attention, as presented in SG, covers precisely this dual function: it contains the element of desire for the Good, the *eros*, which strives for excellence and at the same time turns the individual's concerns away from the self and to the ideal; and

⁵⁹ As McDowell writes of Plato's metaphor, inspired by Murdoch: 'the point of the metaphor is the colossal difficulty of attaining a capacity to cope clear-sightedly with the ethical reality that *is* part of our world...' (McDowell 2001a: 73).

⁶⁰ Murdoch can be seen as anticipating Bernard Williams (1985) in highlighting the importance of thick concepts.

⁶¹ Here too we can hear echoes of Weil's notion of attention. For Weil, love of the world and other people are forms of 'implicit love' of God, because God cannot be loved directly, given his absence, but only through the world and human beings, which are God's creations. Nonetheless, God's creatures are not loved because of what we can see of God in them, but as in themselves. Loving them merely in virtue of their relation to God would be, for Weil, a sin, nor would it be genuine love, since love is attention to the object itself, for its own sake (cf. 'Love of the Order of the World', in WG).

it also attunes itself to the particular case, discerning its moral quality in relation to the ideal but inseparably from the particular features of what it is confronting, taking part in the virtuous circle described above.⁶²

4.2 The Reality of Value

Having clarified the reality of the Good according to Murdoch, and its relation to the mind on one hand, and to value or (small 'g') good things on the other, it still remains to consider whether the two elements of the Good can be put together. This will be done by considering the reality of *value*: as we saw in §4, value is what the relation of Good to the mind and to the world forms. So the central problem we are discussing can be reformulated with relation to value as the tension between the idea of value as a transcendental condition, and value as something in the world. The question can also be formulated as: is value a lens through which we see the world, something that is imposed upon reality by the human mind, or is it something that the mind discovers in the world, there independently of us?

Justin Broackes places this problem among the 'unfinished business' of Murdochian scholarship (Broackes 2012a: 79), indicating that a definite solution has not yet been found, and signalling that the reason is that it cannot be found, because the tension may be internal to Murdoch's work. The essay that is most often referred to as containing the idea of value being 'introduced' in the world by the mind is 'The Darkness of Practical Reason' (DPR), a response to Stuart Hampshire. There Murdoch writes:

A constructive activity of imagination and attention 'introduces' value into the world which we confront. We have already partly willed our world when we come to look at it; and we must admit moral responsibility for this 'fabricated' world. (DPR 201)

This passage can be pitted against others in which Murdoch claims that value is found in the world, rather than inserted or created, for example: '... the word *discovery* is very much in place here. One is just not *inventing* it out of oneself, one is *finding it out*...' (Murdoch interviewed by Christopher Bigsby, in Dooley 2003: 110, quoted in Broackes 2012a: 79).

⁶² The answer to these questions also bears on the problem of Murdoch's particularism noted in Chapter 1: if Good were something that can be seen and described, then it would be possible to move from it to individual cases, and obtain a principle that will explain or reveal the moral character of those instances (cf. Clarke, 2012; Bagnoli 2012). However, if Good is an indefinable ideal which organises values but is not itself perceptible, then nothing but case-by-case discernment will be able to reveal the moral quality of situations and things.

Is this a genuine contradiction, where one alternative is to be discarded? One hypothesis would be that Murdoch moved progressively towards realism in her later work, while DPR dates back to 1966. This possibility is to be rejected for two reasons: firstly, the later MGM contains plenty of observations about how perception depends on evaluative ways of constructing the world. For example:

When we settle down to be ‘thoroughly rational’ about a situation, we have already, reflectively or unreflectively, imagined it in a certain way. Our deepest imaginings which structure the world in which ‘moral judgments’ occur are already evaluations. (MGM 315)

In fact, the idea that consciousness is inherently evaluative recurs throughout Murdoch’s work. Secondly, the controversial words (‘introduces’, ‘fabricated’) in the passage from DPR are in scare quotes, cautioning against taking them at face value. Overall, it seems more plausible to suggest, as Broackes does, that Murdoch is in DPR chiefly interested in presenting a clear contrast to Hampshire’s theory, at the cost of a possible misrepresentation of her own view.

These observations do not, however, solve the tension that Murdoch presents, which is not only a matter of isolated passages but recurs throughout her philosophical work. The ideas that there exists a morally correct way of seeing the world, and that consciousness is fundamentally evaluative, are both at the centre of her philosophy. In order to address the question about whether value is something inherent in cognitive activity, or whether it is something that cognitive activity reveals as part of reality, it is necessary to take a step back and look both at Murdoch’s theory of cognitive activity, and at her understanding of what ‘reality’ is.

4.2.1 The Nature of Consciousness

One of Murdoch’s most important arguments, to be found in different forms both in her early essays like VCM, TL and DPR, as well as in MGM, is that cognition is inherently evaluative. In VCM, the argument is presented mostly as a critique of theories which assume a world of fact upon which value is projected; against such dichotomy of fact and value, Murdoch notes that the very understanding of what the ‘facts’ are depends on values, which select salient aspects according to which they organise the perception of the situation through concepts, which yield certain

‘facts’ rather others.⁶³ There is, for Murdoch, no ‘impersonal world of facts’ (SG 25) to be perceived and *then* evaluated. Thought and perception are not ways of ‘mirroring’ the world, but they are ways of making sense of it through the activity of conceptualising, which according to Murdoch is more like ‘grasping’ or ‘possessing’ something that cannot be identified prior to such grasping. And such grasping, Murdoch indicates, is inescapably evaluative.⁶⁴

This view contains two original and controversial claims: the claim that perception is not immediate, but itself structured by concepts and conceptual schemes;⁶⁵ and that concepts are evaluations, because they are the way in which the human mind, which is the mind of beings for whom morality is ubiquitous (according to Murdoch’s Ontological Proof), approaches the world. Both claims, leading to the conclusion that cognitive activity is inherently evaluative, are developed in MGM. In the chapter ‘Imagination’ (Ch. 11 of MGM), Murdoch agrees with Kant in holding that perception and understanding are ways of ‘organising’ reality according to the faculty of the imagination. But she immediately departs from Kant in maintaining that imagination is a moral faculty, and therefore not something automatic, but something that we can to an extent influence, through values and the will.

The world around us is always presented by a free faculty, which is not that of reason thought of as ‘beaming in’ upon purely empirical situations not otherwise evaluated. Imagination ... can scarcely be thought of as morally neutral ... Our deepest imaginings which structure the world in which ‘moral judgments’ occur are already evaluations. Perception itself is a mode of evaluation. (MGM 314-5)

The claims about the ubiquitousness of a moral faculty in cognition are supported by the phenomenological observations about the perception of value in reality or

⁶³ This idea of Murdoch’s is far reaching and, despite frequent criticisms of Murdoch for her exclusive focus on the individual, can equally be applied to groups, in the analysis of political and cultural ideologies. The idea also constitutes a critique of contemporary analytic moral philosophy itself, pointing out that its ideas about an impersonal world of facts or about the freedom of the will are pictures which are not forced on us, but have been selected based on specific values (in this case, for Murdoch, a ‘liberal ideology’). These ideas have been influential, emerging for instance in Hilary Putnam’s critique of the primacy of a certain conception of scientific thought which professes to be value neutral, while relying on values such as coherence and simplicity. See Putnam (1992: Part 2).

⁶⁴ ‘If we think of conceptualising rather as the activity of grasping, or reducing to order, our situations with the help of a language which is fundamentally metaphorical, this will operate against the world-language dualism which haunts us because we are afraid of the idealists. Seen from this point of view, thinking is not the using of symbols which designate absent objects, symbolising and sensing being strictly divided from each other. Thinking is not designating at all, but rather understanding, grasping, “possessing”’ (TL 41).

⁶⁵ Cf. McDowell (2006) and the discussion in Chapter 5 below.

‘the argument from experience’ in the Proof. To recapitulate the argument: we look at the world, and discover therein valuable things, as well as their relationships to each other and to something absolute (the idea of perfection or the Good); the discovery of the absolute is the discovery of something which governs the whole of reality, the world and the mind; that indicates that all our acts of cognition are in one way or another structured by an orientation to the Good. This orientation is value. So cognition and consciousness are inherently evaluative.

The evaluative activity of perception and thought, deployed in punctual acts of apprehending the world, depends, for Murdoch, on the larger background of the individual’s consciousness. Claiming that cognition is an active grasping, rather than a passive receiving of information, Murdoch also believes that the individual is partly responsible for what she sees and knows. Two chapters in MGM (6, 8) are aimed at rehabilitating the idea of consciousness as something substantial and observable, in order to show how the morality of individuals depends on their consciousness, and that we are partly responsible for all we know and think: ‘we need the concept of consciousness to understand how morality is cognitive. How there is no ubiquitous gulf fixed between fact and value, intellect and will’ (MGM 265). Consciousness is understood as the ‘mode of being’ of the individual, her cognitive activities seen as a cohesive whole, but open and constantly evolving, where the parts influence each other, and which contains all aspects of the individual. The background of consciousness stands in mutual relation to values, where values build up consciousness, but also depend on the background thus built.⁶⁶

The idea of value as transcendental condition of consciousness can apply both to specific values (like, say, a belief in democracy), as well as to one’s whole sense of, or approach to, life. One’s perception or understanding of an object, a person or a situation is related to one’s moral sense and views, whereby for instance what one considers important highlights certain elements of a situation and hides others. If that is true, particular thoughts and perceptions can be said to have moral ‘colour’, determined by one’s overall ‘quality of consciousness’. The moral being of an individual, therefore, finds expression not only in her choices and actions, but

⁶⁶ The idea that values are constitutive of the individual’s self has famously been developed by Charles Taylor (1992), explicitly acknowledging Murdoch’s influence (Taylor 1992: 3). Antonaccio (2000) highlights the connection between Taylor and Murdoch in various occasions.

also and more poignantly in her particular ways of taking in or seeing the world: the concepts she uses (because ‘moral differences are conceptual differences’, VCM 82), as well as the way she understands those concepts. Generally, the descriptions she gives of situations are themselves moral ‘choices’,⁶⁷ because they express her quality of consciousness and her sense of what is important, what life is like, what is meaningful, etc. Even in apparently ‘innocent’ moments, our evaluative nature is at work, including when we are trying merely to apprehend ‘facts’, because what facts are, and what counts as fact, is not determined independently of value, and because ‘almost any description involves an evaluation’ (MGM 155).⁶⁸

The idea that consciousness is structured according to value, however, can appear deeply problematic for Murdoch’s desired realism. The claim that values determine what we see can be part of an anti-realist, subjectivist view, according to which value is what each individual imposes on the world. That would be so if Murdoch only claimed that every individual had a particular sense of value, which shaped her way of seeing things. However (and here we return to the connection between value and the Good), the value that structures consciousness is, as we saw, an ‘orientation’ to the Good itself, which is one and real (MGM 166).⁶⁹ The values that inhere in consciousness are particular understandings and applications of the Good, or the idea of perfection. Like anything else, however, the Good is something that individuals can grasp more or less well, about which they can also be very deeply confused. Saying that consciousness is structured according to its relation to the Good, then, leaves unspecified what kind of relation to the Good each consciousness has. The Good, conceived as the idea of perfection as presented in the Ontological Proof, is a concept with no specifiable content, so that each

⁶⁷ I do not intend the word ‘choice’ here to mean that moral understandings of situations are deliberately or consciously chosen by the individual, but to signal that the individual plays a role in her understanding of a situation, often determined by countless prior choices, mainly having to do with the contents of one’s thoughts.

⁶⁸ Murdoch seems to waver on the point of whether all acts of consciousness are evaluations. In MGM, after stating that ‘consciousness is a form of moral activity’, she adds: ‘of course this does not imply that all states of consciousness are evaluating or can be evaluated’ (MGM 167). I take this statement not as a denial that it is possible that all states of consciousness are evaluative, but as a refusal to make pronouncements about how things *must* be: “‘Every second has moral quality’ would have to be a synthetic *a priori* proposition!” (MGM 167)

⁶⁹ Cf. Martinuk (2014: 184): ‘concerning the nature of the Good, the differences between Murdoch and Taylor are clear: Murdoch defends a uniquely Platonic conception, while Taylor defends the Good as a kind of placeholder filled by a variety of genuine, albeit differing and perhaps irreconcilable, conceptions’.

individual will have to pursue it by herself, yet it is also one and real, so that while it is possible to grasp it poorly, it is also possible to improve one's grasp of it. Therefore, while values are multifarious and potentially mistaken to various degrees, the Good provides the objective standard for the evaluation of the values that structure consciousness, preventing a subjectivist understanding of such values.

What this means, importantly, is that there are both correct and incorrect ways in which one's evaluative outlook can grasp the world. At the same time, because we are limited beings, and cannot grasp anything in a perfectly complete and comprehensive way, there is also more than one possible construction of reality, or various compatible 'takes' on a situation, where individual perspectives can include a greater or smaller number of ways of seeing something.⁷⁰ For instance, a twelve year old child from a disadvantaged family in a favela can be described using a variety of concepts and from various perspectives: he can be a human being who is in need of greater material comfort, a creative young person with artistic potential, a difficult son to a mother who seeks to discipline him, and so on; someone might also see him as cheap labour for one's firm. These perceptions are not all equally valid: to exclude the last construal as unwarranted requires a moral sensitivity which is receptive to the reality being observed, and a moral imagination which can disclose both the actuality as well as the possibilities and requirements of that reality – which are summed up by the idea of being 'closer' to the Good.⁷¹ The standard provided by the Good to the evaluating mind needs to fit the reality being observed. Simone Weil (1946) calls these 'readings' of reality, likening them to the literal situation in which one reads '15' when printed on the page is the number 14: the ways of reading are individual, but the possibilities are fixed by the world.⁷² Likewise, Weil writes, to contemplate not returning a loan is to misread the reality in front of one; it is to wish the loan to be something different from what it is, to wish it not to be the possession of someone else who also wants it back. So to think of a child as cheap labour is to ignore the needs as well as desires that the child has.

⁷⁰ Cf. Putnam (1997), who argues that while there can be no scientifically established single true description of the world, there are various possible descriptions of it, but, crucially, they are not all equally correct. The possibility of more than one description does not entail relativism.

⁷¹ This question is discussed further in relation to moral perception in Ch.5.

⁷² Although, in the example, there does not seem to be more than one possible reading. In many situations, however, that is not the case.

To avoid these ‘misreadings’, Weil suggests, one needs to *pay attention* to the object (Weil 1946: 16-19).⁷³

These final considerations include, alongside the standard that the Good provides to the evaluating mind, the idea that there is a standard or criterion for the determination of value in reality. Such standard still needs to be accounted for. What has been clarified so far is the evaluative nature of consciousness and the necessity, in Murdoch’s framework, for consciousness to grasp the world according to an evaluative activity which, instead of distorting or projecting upon reality, can grasp it correctly. The better one’s understanding of the Good, the more suitable one’s evaluative conceptual scheme will be to grasp reality. This is the relation of Good, as an objective standard, to the mind. The account thus offered, however, is compatible with a purely transcendental understanding of value. Such understanding would, however, clash with a realist interpretation of value, which is required both to explain what grounds the suitability of particular evaluative conceptual schemes, and also to claim that attention, while being itself a valuable exercise of consciousness, also discloses a moral reality. In other words, the relation of Good to value in the world, explored above, needs to be squared with the relation of Good to consciousness, or with value in the mind, just discussed. Murdoch is aiming at such reconciliation when she claims that ‘goodness *is* connected with knowledge’ (SG 38) and that the Good is what unites consciousness to reality. So the question to be addressed is: How can an evaluative faculty at the same time discover value?

4.2.2 Realism about Value

The claim that there is a correct orientation to the Good which makes it possible to see the world clearly carries various implications which need to be justified through a realist account: first, that there is an objective centre of value, the Good, on which clear and just perception depends; second, that both the Good and what it illuminates exist objectively, independently of any individual’s grasp of them; lastly, that there is a way of being such that one is able to perceive more clearly, and that such a way of being is not mere receptivity, but involves actively exercising

⁷³ As Peter Winch puts it, ‘clarity about the nature of the loan is ... a kind of clarity which requires that I attend to reality of the lender’s position and thereby also see my own position from a different point of view’ (Winch 1989: 117).

the right faculties in the right way. The last claim refers to the idea that, if reality is given to the individual via the activity of an evaluative consciousness, the possibility of seeing reality as it is depends on such consciousness being evaluatively structured in the right (most realistic) way. That is the idea of attention, in which a better grasp of the Good makes clear vision possible.⁷⁴

The reality of the Good, which Murdoch claims to establish with the Ontological Argument, has been discussed above. What still needs to be clarified is the possibility of apprehending, in the attentive state, a moral reality which is independent of the individual. 'Moral reality' refers both to the reality of the Good, as well as to the reality of the moral facts that orientation to the Good helps to discover, and it is the latter that requires clarification here. If attention makes it possible to see reality clearly, and if such reality includes moral facts, then attention is not only a virtuous truth-discovering attitude, but also valuable because it provides a clear vision of moral situations, and thus better moral understanding.

The claim that I wish to defend, in relation to Murdoch's philosophy, is that attention yields a genuine cognitive achievement in relation to moral facts. Therefore, moral facts need to exist independently of the attentive subject. These claims are reflective of Murdoch's professed realism, which I now turn to explore. Whether the attribution of realism to Murdoch's theory is correct or not depends, on the one hand, on what is meant by 'realism', and on the other, on Murdoch's understanding of 'reality' and 'truth' and, consequently, what it means for evaluations to be true of something found in reality.

The first difficulty arises with deciding what realism is. Characteristic of 'classical' moral realism are the claims that moral statements describe facts in the world, and that the truth or falsity of those statements is mind-independent. If those are the criteria to be met for a theory to be described as moral realism, Murdoch would face difficulties satisfying them. The mind-independence of the truth of moral statements – and the same goes, importantly, for *any* statement – is challenged by Murdoch's idea that knowledge and perception are a way of grasping of the world, so that every concept, including 'fact' and 'world', is a sort of collaboration or encounter, the result of our constantly perfectible movement towards a transcendent reality. It is, however, not obvious, as we shall see, that

⁷⁴ Since the Good is indefinable and cannot be fully grasped, apprehension of it can only be described in relative terms.

Murdoch discards completely any sort of mind-independence, as well as the idea that a theory needs to endorse it in order to be called realist.⁷⁵

Secondly, the debate between realists and anti-realists is traditionally grounded on a general agreement on what counts as a moral statement, with the realist asserting the existence of the referents (i.e. moral properties or facts) of moral statements, and the anti-realist denying their existence. Murdoch rejects this very premise, showing that moral statements cannot be clearly separated from non-moral statements, since the very activity of apprehending and describing reality is a moral activity, and dividing between what is moral and what is not moral is also something in which value inheres.⁷⁶ So the contrast and comparison that is at the heart of the dispute, whether moral properties and facts are like other properties and facts in their being objects of perception in the world, does not even take off within Murdoch's system.

These considerations do not, however, resolve the tension that gives rise to doubts about Murdoch's realism, the tension between the idea that value is a 'transcendental condition' of consciousness or that morality depends on how we see the world, and the idea that value is something we discover in the world.

4.2.3 Reflexive Realism about Value

Maria Antonaccio has offered a solution to this problem with her 'reflexive realist' interpretation of Murdoch's thought (cf. §4.1.1 above). However, Antonaccio does not explicitly differentiate between the theory's validity in relation to the Good and in relation to value. We saw above how reflexive realism applies to the Good. I now consider whether the theory can help with solving the tension about value. According to Antonaccio, value, like the Good, is to be found 'in the reflexive "space" that exists between the truth seeking mind and the world' (2000: 51). In this way, Antonaccio attempts to settle the problem of whether Good and value exist in the world or in the mind (the tension between realism and idealism) by placing Good and value *between* mind and world. In fact, this 'reflexive space'

⁷⁵ Dancy (1986), Putnam (1992) and McDowell (2001a, 2001c, 2001d), among others, have challenged this latter assumption, with Putnam and McDowell rejecting the idea that objectivity, truth and reality can have any meaning apart from a human perspective.

⁷⁶ This view does not need to be taken to deny that there are concepts that we consider as 'moral' and others that we do not. What it means, rather, is that i) all concepts are the result of human thinking, which is inherently moral (as Murdoch puts it, it is not that all concepts are moral, but that they do not occur in a 'moral void'); and ii) the distinction cannot be made in advance of the particular situation and relative moral salience of its components (cf. Diamond 1996: 108).

refers primarily to the mind, but to the mind as it reflects on its own apprehension of reality – rather than, as Murdoch clearly suggests, apprehending reality itself by directing attention away from the workings of the mind. In its reflexivity, the reflexive realist interpretation seems to weaken realism to the point of making it unrecognisable.

Antonaccio offers a passage from SG to back her view: ‘the value concepts are here patently tied on to the world, they are stretched as it were between the truth-seeking mind and the world...’ (SG 90) What is noticeable about this passage, as David Robjant (2011a) has noted, is that Murdoch is here talking of value *concepts*, not of values. While the idea that value concepts are something ‘between mind and world’ seems hardly controversial, it does not follow from it that value *itself* inhabits that space.⁷⁷ The reflexive realist interpretation, Robjant worries (2011a: 998), risks doing away with the referent, and making concepts into their own referents, moral reality becoming imprisoned in concepts only. Whereas the ‘stretch’ that concepts represent very much depends on what the world is like, as Murdoch makes clear in SG: concepts – including moral concepts – develop and are learnt primarily by attending to the same objects in the same contexts (SG 32).⁷⁸

This conception of value as ‘stretched out’ nevertheless has some appeal, because it explains Murdoch’s idea that value inheres in consciousness and so morality depends on *how we see* the world, while retaining the sense that the world toward which value is stretched plays a role in the picture. However, rather than offering a solution, this only reformulates the problem, while shifting the balance towards idealism. In this way, reflexive realism does little justice to the object of moral vision, and to Murdoch’s stress on ‘reality’ as a normative concept. Whereas, as the full passage from which the quote above comes reads:

The value concepts are here patently tied on to the world, they are stretched as it were between the truth-seeking mind and the world, they are not moving about on

⁷⁷ Similarly to Antonaccio, Bagnoli quotes the same passage on value concepts and rephrases it as ‘values are anchored to the world through the workings of our mind’ (Bagnoli 2012: 209). At times reflexive realism only appears to claim that knowledge must pass through the structures of consciousness, or that we can only comprehend reality with the ‘tools’ of our minds. If that were so, it would amount to a relatively uninteresting claim, and not one that would warrant a theory with a new label, as Nora Hämäläinen (2013) and Robjant (2011a) note.

⁷⁸ The idea that attention to a common object is central to the development of vocabulary and of concepts, and that learning takes places through ‘joint attention’, as briefly suggested by Murdoch, is widely studied in psychology and philosophy of perception. See for e. Tomasello (1995) and Campbell (2002).

their own as adjuncts of the personal will. The authority of morals is the authority of truth, that is of reality. (SG 90)

The passage suggests that it is on reality, ultimately, that the authority of morals lies. If *how* we see matters, then the object of such perception matters too, indeed more, because ways of seeing are evaluated according to their ability to do justice to the object. Observing consciousness, considered as a locus of morality, can indeed tell one a lot about the *subject* of that consciousness, their 'texture of being', as Murdoch puts it. But the quality of moral consciousness depends crucially on how clearly and justly one sees the world. Reflexive realism, therefore, does not help to reconcile Murdoch's realism about value with the evaluative nature of consciousness. If the reconciliation is possible, a different approach is required.

5 A Possible Solution

In what follows, I suggest one way to understand Murdoch's philosophy so that the transcendental and the realist claims can be reconciled. The framework I propose is one in which value is a real constituent of the world, but, in order to apprehend it, an evaluative capacity is required. Value is then something different depending on whether it is in the world or in the mind. The solution below is not explicitly put forward by Murdoch herself, there being in her writing no explicit recognition of the tension and therefore no account of how it can be accommodated. Nevertheless, it is clear that Murdoch argued both for the reality of value in the world, and for its role as shaping consciousness. What I suggest is a potentially plausible way of capturing the spirit of Murdoch's claims about the objective reality of value which avoids the exhaustive disjunction between some form of idealism and realism.

The first step consists in differentiating between value as shaping consciousness and value as object of consciousness. Both depend on the Good, but they play different roles. In the first case, the value that shapes consciousness takes the form of particular concerns or principles, which need to be generic enough to act as lens or as organising principles according to which perception can be structured. So, for example, a person who values justice will be more ready to perceive situations in the light of justice-related considerations, and more sensitive to that element of particular cases. Besides particular values or concerns, the idea that value structures consciousness also relates to the intensity and promptness with which a moral sensibility is ready to discern moral features of reality. A general

concern with the Good, according to Murdoch, is likely to make the individual more receptive to reality because of her desire to see clearly and justly. In the second case, the value of particular objects or situations is a property of those objects and situations. The specific relation to the Good or perfection determines the goodness of the object, but, as we have seen, the value of the object is a more specific property, in which a degree of perfection is instantiated in a particular way: as justice, beauty, honesty, etc.

Murdoch conceives the mind as continuously engaged in trying to grasp a reality which transcends it. In her attack on post-structuralism, she emphasises the importance of being aware that there is a reality beyond us, not just as individuals but as human beings, even beyond the ways in which we conceptualise it: ‘of course we are constantly conceptualising what confronts us ... but what we encounter remains free, ambiguous, endlessly contingent, and *there*’ (MGM 196), and recuperates the idea of correspondence, which she holds as ‘essential’, being ‘the fundamental fact and feel of the constant comparison and contrast of language with a non-linguistic world’ (MGM 195-6).

However, because of the structure of the mind, which can only apprehend the world through imagination and concepts, a perfect transparent correspondence is not possible. Human faculties and concepts are useful tools for deepening one’s understanding of the world, but they are ultimately limited, and the moral-epistemic ‘pilgrimage’ described by Murdoch is by its nature incomplete. While Murdoch does not deny the existence of the world ‘as it is in itself’, nor that at exceptional times human individuals can get a half-glimpse of it, such direct apprehension is conceived as an ideal: a sort of Platonic *noesis*, one in which we are no longer thinking, no longer conceptualising and organising, where ‘the imagining mind achieves an end of images and shadows’ (MGM 320), similar to Dante’s climactic transformation of the intellect at the end of the *Paradiso* (MGM 319).

One level below, ordinary consciousness is able to access reality through concept-using evaluative imagination. Here, through the ‘transcendental barrier’ which Murdoch pictures as a porous sponge, is where the encounter or reconciliation between the evaluating mind and the value in the world takes place. The only way in which we can apprehend the world is through faculties and concepts, which are governed by moral sensibility; the concepts we deploy, and how we deploy them, participate of the moral sensibility, both of the individual,

and of the community which has developed those concepts. So value appears as a necessary element of the operation with which the mind reaches out to reality. This is what the characterisation of value as transcendental refers to.

It follows from this that moral faculties are employed in perception of all reality, whether it is considered moral reality or not. So the argument about the objective existence of reality as perceived through moral consciousness takes as its object both moral and non-moral reality. Moral perception enables the perception of reality, whether moral or not. But the moral quality of perception and its individual character entail that it cannot be determined in advance whether something counts as moral or not.

Within ordinary concept-using cognition, apprehension of reality can be more or less successful: at one end of the spectrum there is attentive consciousness, which enables the best possible apprehension of the world achievable through the proper use of the imagination and applying the right concepts in the right way; at the other end, there is fantasy, where concepts are misapplied and misunderstood and imagination does not reach out to reality but apprehends through the veil of self-gratifying desires. (This distinction is explored in the following chapters, especially Chapters 3 and 6).

The problem for realism arises from the claim that particular faculties, such as the imagination and moral sensibilities, shape our perception of reality. However, that does not entail that what is perceived as moral fact is not part of reality, or that it is a distortion of it. Rather, (moral) faculties, to which the ability to use concepts is central, can be understood as grasping a reality which is 'out there' and separate, but which cannot be grasped by human beings independently of those faculties. Similarly, to claim that vision is required to see does not entail that the objects of vision are projections or creations of the mind. There is something in reality to which thought latches on, and the success of particular concepts depends on whether they fit or grasp the reality that they describe. The testing ground of consciousness, as Murdoch puts it, is the world. So the testing ground of the evaluative activity of cognition is the reality that cognition takes in. The idea that the Good structures both mind and world can be understood thus: there are degrees of perfection in reality, manifest in various moral facts and properties, and the mind,

in order to perceive them correctly, needs to be attuned to the same idea of perfection which determines specific moral facts.⁷⁹

Murdoch's model of (moral) reality can be pictured as an encounter between a conceptualising evaluating consciousness and a reality external to the mind which can nevertheless only be grasped through the 'tools' of the mind. The relationship between mind and world is reciprocal but not symmetrical: mind seeks reality, but it is reality that dictates which concepts and ways of seeing it are possible and which are not. While we only encounter reality through concepts, what we encounter is constrained and determined by the objective features of the world. The evaluating consciousness shapes the world to make it available to us, but the authority of morals is the authority of reality (SG 90).

This position cuts across the fact/value divide according to which fact is perceived directly and value is projected: nothing is perceived directly, if that means passively and without the workings of the human faculties; at the same time, that does not require us to discard the notions of 'fact' and 'truth', but only to recognise that they are arrived at through a different process. It is, in fact, precisely the values through which we see reality and organise it into concepts that can help rather than hinder correct perception of reality, by providing useful conceptual schemes, and the motivation to seek to improve one's perception (as we shall see in Chapters 3 to 5).

5.1 Murdochian Human Realism

To accept that reality is not independent of the mind distances Murdoch from 'standard' moral realism, which holds that moral reality is mind-independent (Bagnoli 2012: 210), but it also distances her from such metaphysical realism about the world more generally, where not only moral facts, but all facts are mind-independent. On the other hand, Murdoch's view seems consistent with various alternative forms of realism proposed more recently, which maintain truth and reality as something objective, but deny that those concepts can even be made sense of independently of a human perspective. Hilary Putnam's 'internal realism'

⁷⁹ Thus Lavery (2007) attributes to Murdoch a philosophy of the 'third way', 'between absolutism (an objective impersonal unified truth) and subjectivism (proliferating, plural subjective "truths")' (Lavery 2007: 9), where the mind is pictured neither as a 'mirror' nor a 'lamp', but as a 'lens', which grasp a reality external to itself but, necessarily, with its own resources, which order and form it in such a way as to make it available to us.

(1992)⁸⁰ and John McDowell's (2001) form of realism are two such theories, and both acknowledge Murdoch as having inspired elements of their views.

Both Putnam and McDowell are also heavily influenced by Wittgenstein, as well as by Kant, in their rejection of the premise on which idealism and realism are pitted against each other: either concepts are products of a mind-independent empirically established reality, or they are mental creations. Wittgenstein implodes such a dichotomy, by noting how the very distinction depends on language:⁸¹ his 'Copernican revolution', as Dilman (2002) writes, is the idea that 'our language is not founded on an empirical reality with which we are in contact through sense perception. Rather our language determines the kind of contact we have with such a reality and our conception of it' (Dilman 2002: 76). Language determines the *kind* of contact we have with reality, but that does not imply, crucially, that reality is determined by language.

For Murdoch, it is the inherently evaluative, imaginative activity of consciousness and the concepts it uses that are primary to this distinction. Concepts are human ways of grasping and making sense of reality, and they are also, for Murdoch, embedded in an inescapably human moral sensibility; it follows that an understanding of such sensibility – which involves sharing into moral sensibilities – is required in order to understand the concepts.⁸² What concepts capture, on the other hand, is not determined by the mind; rather, specific concepts can be more or less appropriate ways of grasping a particular reality: the correct application of a concept depends on the world.

These ideas partly anticipate the line of argument put forth by McDowell (2001d), who similarly argues that since the human community is made up of people whose activities include moral thinking, then grasping moral concepts within such a community requires having already a sense of value, or an 'evaluative outlook', which enables one to understand what counts as courageous, brave, etc., which an understanding limited to empirical claims cannot yield. The position from which we understand moral concepts, too, is from within the human community,

⁸⁰ Now abandoned by Putnam. See Putnam (1994).

⁸¹ While for Kant the distinction depends on the categories.

⁸² The idea that to properly understand moral concepts and a moral sensibility one needs to participate in it to an extent, rather than merely grasp it intellectually, is part of Murdoch's idea that moral understanding involves the whole individual, and of her internalist conception of ethics. For an elaboration on this latter point (in relation to the idea that psychopaths cannot be said to properly understand moral claims despite their apparent intellectual competence), see Denham (2012).

which is also the perspective of a life with value. From that perspective, moral concepts can be perceived, grasped, and deepened. Accepting an ‘anthropocentricity of an evaluative outlook’, where value is not considered from an (impossible) extra-human perspective, ‘makes space’, according to McDowell, ‘for a realism, of a different sort, about values’ (2001d: 212).⁸³

The idea that reality is inseparable from the conceptualising evaluative activity of the human mind does not do away with truth and objectivity. But truth and objectivity are placed within human life and activities. Cavell has commented that this shift can make us giddy, give us vertigo. But that, as McDowell (2001) answers, is only because of the assumption that a concept has been correctly applied only if one follows universal rules, independently of human practises and the set of responses and attitudes that we typically have as participants in the practises. (McDowell, 2001d: 203). This argument extends to all concepts, but it raises particular problems when it comes to moral concepts, which are assumed not to refer to something ‘in the world’. And yet it is precisely the meaning of ‘in the world’ that is being questioned: if it is assumed that what is objectively there has to be so outside of the perspective from which we discern things as being there, then moral concepts certainly do not pass the test, but it is far from clear that other concepts, including empirical ones, do.

These considerations refer to ordinary human cognition, which is what Murdoch is concerned with in her picture of morality. However, as noted above, Murdoch does not in this way give up the idea of a mind-independent reality. The purpose of maintaining such a notion is not, as it may be supposed, to question the ability of ordinary cognition to grasp the world in a truthful and objective manner. Nor is the idea of a mind-independent world pointless, given Murdoch’s contention that reality is only grasped through human faculties. The importance of the reminder that there is a world beyond cognition – as Murdoch calls it, a transcendent reality – lies in its acting as constant reminder that our grasp of reality, while capturing in better and worse ways something genuinely there, is never complete or perfect.

⁸³ Interestingly, if we now think that Murdoch’s Platonism must be either given up or considerably watered down because of the lack of a mind independent world, McDowell suggests that precisely the sort of realism he is proposing can be taken as ‘a species of Platonism’ if, as he thinks, Plato himself did not believe in the mind-independent reality of values (McDowell 2001d: 215-6). That would be consistent with Murdoch’s reminders that Plato wrote in metaphors, and that is how we must understand the Forms and the idea of ascent. See also Robjant (2012) for a different interpretation of Plato which makes it consistent with Murdoch’s views.

Hence the importance of constantly questioning one's perceptions, trying to improve one's understanding and to 'deepen' the concepts that one uses.

The perfectible quality of cognition is at the centre of Murdoch's perfectionism, which this framework accommodates. According to this view, the moral activity is one of constantly improving one's grasp of reality, testing it both against other people's grasp and understanding, and against 'the resistant otherness of other persons, other things, history, the natural world, the cosmos...' (MGM 268), guided by the principle of the Good. To this extent, reality shares the property of the Good of being transcendent, not only beyond the individual, but beyond the complete grasp of the human mind, and thus not fully describable either. The independence or transcendence of reality, then, is pointed out by Murdoch with two purposes: one is to show how difficult it is to see truly, and the sheer distance of the ideal; the other, linked with the first, is to remind us that we are always at risk of underestimating the distance between our confused cognition and reality, and that reality is always beyond our full grasp, and our concepts, however good, are still images, 'pointers', not 'resting places' (MGM 318). Thus, Murdoch's reminders of the 'otherness' of reality, transcending not only ourselves but our minds as human beings, do not need to be an endorsement of a metaphysical kind of realism, where 'facts' and 'values' exist independently of our grasp of them.

The perfectionism of our understanding of the world is exercised both against the world and against our concepts, which we hardly ever fully master, and where 'world' is itself a concept that we struggle to make sense of. The inherent perfectibility of our grasp of reality, rather than suggesting a mind-independent world, is in fact suggested as part of an argument for the objectivity of value statements. That includes the ability to discard certain concepts in favour of others after having observed the situation more closely and more attentively, just like the mother in law does in the story of M&D (Cf. SG 17-23). The ability to recognise one's mistaken evaluative outlook and adopt a new one implies a progress from a less to a more accurate vision. Attention provides the best epistemic conditions for moral progress to be possible and that, since one cannot move beyond the conceptualising human condition, is where truth is to be found. Nevertheless, what our concepts grasp is not exhausted by the concepts themselves, and that is why Murdoch exhorts us, not only to deepen our grasp of concepts, but to keep testing them and improving them against the otherness of the world.

Conclusions

Murdoch's metaphysics revolves around the notion of a 'moral reality' whose nature, however, appears divided between an ideal Good and ordinary value, each of them in turn being divided between being a structuring element of the mind and something existing and in the world, outside the mind. This chapter has been an attempt to offer a clarification of the idea of moral reality, by analysing in depth the tensions in Murdoch's writing and offering, in response, solutions which build on and are compatible with her position, but which are not always explicitly articulated in her work. Clarifying the nature and meaning of moral reality and the very possibility of its existence is central to any understanding and analysis of attention as a moral faculty/attitude with which the subject can apprehend such reality.

The central concept of Murdoch's moral metaphysics, the Good, is a 'single, perfect, transcendent, non-representable, necessarily real object of attention' (SG 55), which is meant to 'purify the energy' of the individual and thus make her morally better. The main effect of such purification is the improved quality of one's vision, or the greater clarity of one's perception. Good operates in individuals by increasing their grasp of truth. The examination of the connection between Good and truth has yielded a notion of truth as valuable for three related reasons: because such attitude includes virtues such as selflessness, honesty and humility; because the idea of the Good is discovered through an apprehension of the totality of existence itself, truth being inseparable from it; and because by grasping truth one is also at the same time able to grasp moral reality. The connection between truth and Good establishes attention as the most important faculty of the moral individual, which by revealing truth makes the attentive person morally better.

In order to understand the role of the Good and value in the mind and the world, two distinctions have been necessary. First, Good has been distinguished from value, the former being the ideal on which value depends. Second, both have been divided between their role in the mind and their role in the world. In the mind, Good is the ideal of perfection with reference to which consciousness structures itself. In the world, Good appears as something like a property of things which is never fully instantiated and which combines with the particular properties of objects to create what we perceive as value.

This clarification still leaves the original tension unsolved, shifting the difficulty from Good to value: how can value be both a transcendental condition,

and exist in the form of moral facts or properties in the world? My suggestion is that understanding value as part of our imaginative concept-making faculties is not incompatible with perceiving it as part of reality, if imagination and concepts are conceived as human tools that, on the one hand, require certain sensibilities (including moral sensibilities, which are, according to Murdoch, inherent in human life) for their understanding and application, but on the other what grounds concepts is the reality they aim at capturing. Conceptualising is a human evaluative activity, but that is compatible with considering it as constrained and generated in the first place by real features of the world. Observation of ordinary concept use supports this account, in the way moral concepts can be applied correctly or incorrectly, where the standard for correctness is the reality the concept is meant to capture. Moral progress occurs through the improvement of one's use of moral concepts and the deepening of one's grasp of them, and that takes place in the experience of reality, and by comparing one's grasp of reality with other people's. The picture that I have presented does not claim to constitute an argument for moral realism, but to reconcile, in Murdoch, the moral realist strain with that of the transcendental, and to provide, if Murdoch's picture is endorsed, a way to understand moral realism.

Murdoch's merit, with the apparent tension in her theory, is that she takes seriously, and tries to account for, two elements of morality that are part of our ordinary experience: the fact that morality depends on how we approach and construe situations (which, on its own, could lead to subjectivism); and the fact that we consider the moral concepts we employ, and the moral judgments we make, to be genuinely about the world, not about our attitude to it. This picture makes the faculty of attention crucial to moral being. On the one hand, if morality is an inherent part of consciousness, then consciousness needs to be guided by a moral faculty, which is openly sensitive to, and seeking, the Good to help structure every act of cognition. On the other hand, the faculty that directs consciousness also needs to be truth-seeking, because value, and the possibility to perform good actions, are to be found in the world, not in the mind. Cognition and evaluation, for Murdoch, merge: attention combines the explicitly moral element, its *eros* or desire for the Good with the cognitive activity that aims at seeing the world as it is.

Having offered an account of the existence of value in the world, which attention can make available to perception, it now remains to examine more closely the ways in which the mind apprehends the world and the value in it. If

consciousness is evaluative, and if value exists in the world, what needs to be explained is the specific way in which the mind is able to utilise its evaluative structures to apprehend the moral reality in the world – in other words, what constitutes an attentive and hence morally good consciousness, as opposed to one which fails to grasp reality clearly and justly.

Chapter 3

Iris Murdoch's Concept of Attention

Introduction

Having examined and clarified the metaphysical background, developed from Murdoch, upon which the importance of attention rests, in this chapter I move on to consider the concept of attention itself. The metaphysics just explored provides the background which makes claims about attention intelligible, and the constraints which the Murdochian idea of attention needs to respect. The solution presented in the previous chapter provides the grounding for Murdoch's central claim: that there is a moral reality, which is available to the human mind only through the virtuous exercise of various faculties that Murdoch calls attention. If, as argued in the metaphysics, reality, including moral reality, is not apprehended passively by the mind, but requires the active exercise of the individual's faculties, then the exercise of those faculties – through attention – is central to morality. In this and the following chapter I turn to an examination of how the mind operates in apprehending moral reality, what faculties are required, how they are exercised, and to what extent they lie within the individual's control. Putting together the metaphysical claims of Chapters 1 and 2, with the explorations of the mind of chapters 3 and 4, I will then explore how mind and world meet thanks to attention in moral perception in Chapter 5.

The main aim of the present chapter is to introduce and clarify the concept of attention as suggested by Murdoch, who uses it throughout her work but does not offer a systematic account of it. For that purpose, I begin with an introduction of Murdoch's moral psychology, before analysing attention itself in more detail, drawing out its central aspects. That will allow me, finally, to clarify to what extent and in what aspects Murdoch's notion of attention is inherited from Simone Weil. Since most of this chapter constitutes an overview of the concept of attention, it also introduces some key ideas and problems that will return and be developed in the rest of the thesis, as I indicate in the relevant sections.

The central question to be addressed by moral philosophy is, according to Murdoch, 'how do we make ourselves morally better?' (SG 52). In the previous chapters, we saw that the answer to this question depended on an understanding of

the Good, conceived of as the magnetic centre towards which the moral subject must tend in order to become better. Analysing the idea of the Good has provided some understanding of its nature: something indefinable but real, external to the individual, illuminating reality and leading to the truth, and manifest in good things, people and actions as the standard of perfection to which everything tends. If Good is understood in this way, then moral improvement will proceed along the path of knowledge of a reality external to the individual, where ‘reality’ is something that can be apprehended with effort and progressively, and with the help of moral and imaginative faculties: ‘the good and just life is thus a process of clarification, a movement toward selfless lucidity, guided by ideas of perfection which are objects of *love*’ (MGM 14).⁸⁴ The burden of the moral life lies in learning how to become as able as possible to ‘see’ reality as it is. I shall argue that attention, being what enables the individual to achieve this end, is the pivot of moral improvement. In order to understand how attention works, some observations about the moral psychology in which it is embedded are in order.

1 Murdoch’s Moral Psychology

While Murdoch’s moral psychology complements her metaphysical picture, it may be said that the former is held by her to be of yet more importance. Metaphysics can guide morals, but in order for that to be possible the right mental faculties and attitudes need to be cultivated. What is needed, Murdoch argues, is ‘a working philosophical psychology ... which can at least attempt to connect modern psychological terminology with a terminology concerned with virtue’ (SG 46). Part of her project is to provide such moral psychology. The Good is discovered, according to Murdoch, not directly but through what it does; the main role of the Good is to guide the individual toward a better – more realistic, truthful, just – appreciation of reality. Morality is then played out in the relationship of the individual consciousness with reality. Against such a background, it is not surprising that Murdoch holds that ‘the central concept of morality is “the individual”’ (SG 30) and that she regards ‘the (daily, hourly, minutely) attempted purification of consciousness as the central and fundamental “arena” of morality’ (MGM 193). Truthful vision is both the path and the aim of the moral life: the Good

⁸⁴ These lines are written with reference to Plato, but they can serve well to summarise Murdoch’s own ideas, or the main points on which she thinks Plato was right.

guides the individual towards clearer perception, as well as being indirectly manifest in the world, in the objects of the individual's perception.

The centrality in morality of the individual, considered as a coherent whole, is to be understood both by regarding the individual as subject and as object: as objects, other individuals are the most important and most difficult 'transcendent' reality that we have to try to apprehend clearly. As subjects, our moral being presents itself in how we engage with reality, being part of the 'tissue of consciousness' of the person, which Murdoch equates roughly with the self (MGM 147-8). To morally assess others, as well as oneself, Murdoch holds, one needs to look at a highly complex and composite ever changing unity, people's 'quality of consciousness': how they think, what they think, their 'total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessment of others ... what they find funny' (VCM 80-1).

Murdoch then operates with a notion of human being as a unified entity. On the one hand, as her moral epistemology shows, if what we believe depends in part on our will, desires and imagination, and in turn what we choose and desire depends on what we perceive, then will and belief, cognition and affect, are not separate faculties but work together in articulating moral perception. Will can direct imagination, for instance, by inviting certain images or possibilities and suppressing others. Imagination can be both good, creative, constructive and truthful, or bad when fear, anxiety or other ego-driven forces direct it away from reality, a process which Murdoch names 'fantasy'. This means that a change in consciousness – a change in moral quality – will have to engage the whole individual, intellect, will, desires. Following William James, Murdoch pictures consciousness as a stream, which cannot be divided into 'parts', but which constitutes an organic whole.⁸⁵ What she refers to as 'moral character' is such a comprehensive vision of the individual, in which every little detail is telling of a general quality of moral vision, with its specific desires and values, which reach in various ways into all thoughts and actions. 'What moves us – motives, desires, reasoning – emerges from a constantly changing complex. Moral change is the change of that complex' (MGM 300).

⁸⁵ Hence her rejection of the phenomenological reduction, which purports to isolate one item of consciousness for contemplation: cf. MGM 232-4.

Often Murdoch describes moral progress using Plato's parable of the cave: purification of consciousness is a turning around (*periagoge*) of the *whole* individual (the soul) moved by desire for the Good, a desire which gets progressively refined as one learns to see more clearly, by desiring better and better objects (the 'degrees of perfection' argument), and advancing toward what is more real and better, which each object, seen in relation to the previous one, points to. This idea is expressed by Simone Weil, drawing on the same Platonic source, thus: 'the soul cannot turn its eyes in a new direction without turning entirely in that direction' (SN 106). Having reached the vision of the sun (the Good), the soul will be able to see the world as it is, rather than through the veil of appearance (Murdoch's selfish fantasy). Such turning around is precisely what attention consists in, as we shall see; considered as what occasions moral change, attention is too, therefore, something that involves the individual as a whole.

This understanding of the individual provides at least two reasons to claim that thought is moral: one is that value influences our imaginative construction of reality – which for Murdoch is also involved in perception - in all its aspects. This has the consequence, as she claims, of making the individual's mind closer to reality than on the 'existentialist' model, where the will is free to choose among 'given' facts: on the Murdochian model, the world one sees is partly one's own responsibility. Secondly, thought is moral because we are moral beings – as we saw in the ontological argument – who cannot help but think in terms of value and truth, and we are unified beings, whose particular thoughts and desires take place on the background of our evaluating consciousness (cf. MGM 300).

Murdoch argues, as we saw in the previous chapter, that Good is ubiquitous, and that it is omnipresent in consciousness because the individual's understanding of the Good shapes her every thought and perception. Individual acts of cognition, being part of this whole, are also influenced by such an idea of the Good. Two important points follow from this view: firstly, individual acts, or even thoughts and intentions, are not to be considered on their own, as most consequentialist and deontological theories suggest, but can only be properly understood against the background of the individual's consciousness and its broader relation to morality. Secondly, and yet more radically, if morality can be seen as a general orientation governed by some values, which determines individual thoughts, perceptions, as well as choices, then morality primarily depends on 'vision' rather than choice. Not

only how, but *what* one sees depends on one's values and moral quality of consciousness ('we see different worlds', VCM 82). To use an example from Martha Nussbaum and discussed by Cora Diamond, the person who sees life as an adventure will also perceive individual realities in the light of such vision (cf. Diamond 1996); she can be said to see, and live in, a different world from the person who sees life as, say, a valley of tears. This also means, crucially, that moral disagreement is not a matter of applying different principles to the same facts, nor disagreements about the method of application of principles to facts, but of how to understand and conceptualise reality (cf. Ch. 5 below).

Thus Murdoch claims that 'moral differences are conceptual differences' (VCM 82), insofar as the understanding and applications of concepts are also gradually learned in the context of an individual's moral sensibility. Concepts are, in this picture, not impersonal tools, but modes of evaluation with infinite modulations: part of the aim of 'The Idea of Perfection' in SG is to show how individual concepts, and particularly moral concepts, are not determined by 'the impersonal world of language' working upon a 'hard objective world of facts' (SG 25), but they are learned in contexts by individuals, who then make a partly personal use of them and go on to progressively learn their meaning in the light of vision and experience (Murdoch uses the example of how the concept of courage changes with life experience in SG 29); concepts are then both public and private. This argument connects with the observation about the transcendence of reality and its constantly perfectible knowledge, adding into the picture the importance of the individuality of the knowing valuing subject.⁸⁶

The idea that moral differences are differences in vision, which in turn depends on moral consciousness, brings the burden of morality back to the question that I started from: how do we 'purify', as Murdoch puts it, consciousness so that it becomes virtuous, and so also better able to see clearly? In 'On God and Good', as we saw, Murdoch claims that moral progress and purification of consciousness depend on the objects of one's attention, and suggests that the Good, formerly God, is the object that can best lead to moral improvement if attended to. Whether *attention* to the Good is possible, rather than focus or desire, is a question I consider below (Ch.4§2-3). For the moment, the idea is helpful to introduce a notion of

⁸⁶ This is discussed in detail in Chapter 7 through Murdoch's critique of Wittgensteinian ideas about the public nature of concepts.

individual consciousness that depends on its objects. Murdoch sees the individual as a 'system of energy', the direction and quality of which is determined by the objects of one's thoughts, desires or attachments. Desire, for Murdoch, is what directs consciousness to particular objects, so it is first of all desire that needs to be controlled and directed properly. Because human beings are 'naturally attached' and cannot desire nothing, nor can consciousness be without an object, the path to improvement or purification of desires does not lie in eradication of desires, but in their re-direction.

Murdoch follows Plato in thinking that what we all really desire is the Good. Whatever we want, we want it because we believe it is, rightly or wrongly, somehow good. Desires, therefore, depend on the individual's sense of value. That is why, by purifying desires, one also purifies one's moral consciousness. Desiring and occupying oneself with certain objects involves taking up a particular point of view, which influences the imaginative construction of the world around one, hence also perception. Depending on one's sense of value or orientation to the Good, desires create focal points which arrange consciousness in certain ways. If one values being successful in one's job, for instance, one will be more likely to perceive a particular situation in the light of that desire and the possibilities it affords for fulfilling one's aim, overlooking other features. Thus consciousness is purified by changing one's desires as well as the focus of one's thoughts. So the claims about the ubiquity of value in consciousness, observed with reference to Murdoch's metaphysics, are reinstated with reference to desire: value structures consciousness, in better and worse ways, and it does so because we desire what we value, so the objects of desire become central to our consciousness and we see other things in their light.

However, we can be deeply mistaken about where the Good lies. So our values and desires, and in turn our cognition and perception, can be distorted to various extents. The main source of this distortion, Murdoch believes, is the self or ego. This introduces the last central element of Murdoch's moral psychology to be mentioned, one considered by Murdoch to be an empirical fact, which is that we are 'naturally selfish'. Our primary object of interest is our self, and our desires tend to move towards self-gratification – conceived as a good; such tendency is considered to be a central aspect of human nature, and although Murdoch recognises that Freud may be correct in claiming that some degree of fantasy may

be necessary to survive ('Truth is unbearable', MGM 130),⁸⁷ she holds that morality – in its ideal form - points in the opposite direction. The egocentric nature of human beings includes, on the one hand, the illusion of one's centrality in the world, bringing about an undue preoccupation with oneself which makes other matters – and other people and their needs – less salient or even invisible; and on the other, and partly as a consequence of the first aspect, it includes the use of 'bad imagination' to create images and thoughts that satisfy the desires of the ego: this inward-directed, falsifying use of the imagination Murdoch calls 'fantasy', as opposed to the outward directed, truth-making 'imagination' proper. The egocentric nature of human beings is then connected with a tendency away from the Good, because it pulls away from the real. If consciousness depends on what it desires, a selfish consciousness, whilst desiring perceived goods, does not desire true goods. Conversely, a purified consciousness will be, at the same time, more realistic, less selfish, and 'turned' or focused outward, towards reality. If Murdoch is right, what follows is the controversial idea that most of our moral failings are determined by selfishness and egocentricity.⁸⁸

The solution to the metaphysical problem presented in Chapter 2, about how to combine the idea that morality is played out in the nature of one's personal vision (from the metaphysical statement that value is transcendental) with the idea that what is chiefly required of the moral subject is to perceive (moral) reality clearly and truthfully (from the metaphysical notion of the existence of moral truths) also helps to make sense of Murdoch's moral psychology. The emphasis on modes of consciousness structured by evaluative desires as the arena of moral improvement is combined, without tension, with the idea that such moral improvement depends on how values (and related desires) orientate consciousness in the direction of just and truthful apprehension of reality, including the right apprehension of value.

⁸⁷ On this point, Murdoch agrees with Eliot's 'Human kind cannot bear very much reality' ('Burnt Norton', *Four Quartets*), which she echoes in SG 64: 'It is true that human beings cannot bear much reality'.

⁸⁸ This idea is criticised, for example, by Blum (2012). However, Blum takes Murdoch to claim that ego-driven fantasy is the *only* source of distortion and thus of moral flaws; whereas Murdoch is proposing an alternative picture to the will-based dominant one, not an exhaustive picture, as she repeatedly claims. I discuss the idea that the ego is the main cause of moral failings further in Chapter 6.

2 Murdoch's Concept of Attention

Murdoch's understanding of the way in which the individual can make moral progress through a purification of consciousness in the direction of justice and realism can be condensed in the concept of attention. Attention, Murdoch writes, is 'the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent' (SG 34) (a descriptive and normative statement), and she identifies virtue with 'selfless attention' (SG 41). The concept of attention is thus central to Murdoch's moral philosophy. It is what defines a good person and what is necessary for being good. Although Murdoch considers other people to be the main testing ground of morality, she does not exclude anything from being a potential object of moral consideration, and thus an object of attention: 'the view which I suggest... connects morality with attention to individuals, human individuals or individual realities of other kinds' (SG 38) which can include 'other things, history, the natural world, the cosmos ...' (MGM 268). So attention is presented in SG as a 'moral' concept (albeit not consistently, as we shall see in Ch.4§1.1), as *a particular way of confronting and apprehending reality* (SG 37). Murdoch takes the concept of attention, with few modifications, from Simone Weil, to whom her whole moral psychology is also heavily indebted.

2.1 Attention as Vision

Attention is introduced in SG as a 'just and loving gaze directed toward an individual reality' (SG 34). Visual metaphors abound in Murdoch's philosophy and attention itself, in this passage and elsewhere, is presented as a visual faculty or activity. An ambiguity already presents itself in Murdoch's characterisation of attention, concerning whether it is to be understood as an intellectual faculty, or also as a form of perception and specifically visual perception.

Visual attention is both a metaphor for moral attention and an actual form of it. Murdoch indicates the importance of the metaphor of vision with reference to Plato: in the myth of the cave, the soul progresses spiritually and morally through increasing apprehension of beauty, which presents itself to sight – where beauty is not to be understood as physical only, but as something more abstract, and as the most clearly visible kind of goodness (MGM 15). At the end of the 'ascent', the good soul achieves the vision of the Forms. Sight is the most natural metaphor to represent apprehension of reality, including moral reality, because, as Plato writes, 'sight is the clearest of our physical senses'; however, he continues, 'it is unable to

perceive wisdom' (*Phaedrus* 250D, quoted in MGM 15). The fact that wisdom cannot be captured by sight indicates not so much the limit of the metaphor of vision, but rather the general limitation of human faculties when it comes to apprehending 'spiritual truths', values, absolutes. Like Plato, who 'is suggesting the naturalness of using visual images to express spiritual truths' (MGM 15), Murdoch takes vision to highlight the immediacy of moral knowledge at its best, the fact that, when proper attention is exercised, moral knowledge is not a product of deliberation and reflection, but of immediate apprehension. Talking of vision also brings to the fore one of Murdoch's main concerns, that of representing morality as not primarily dependent on action, but on cognition and consciousness.

It thus appears that the metaphorical and literal domains cannot be neatly separated. The metaphor of vision in moral apprehension cannot be reduced to a non-metaphorical description while expressing the same meaning (cf. MGM 177-8): 'the largely explicable ambiguity of the word "see" ... conveys the essence of the concepts of the moral' (MGM 177).⁸⁹ We experience this ambiguity when, in everyday communication, we ask each other 'can't you *see* that ... he is being sarcastic, or that the dog is in pain?' In these cases, it seems as if replacing the visual term with an intellectual one would not do.

A further reason to reject the separation of attention as vision into a literal and a metaphorical sense is that, as Diamond (1996: 107-108) notes, given Murdoch's arguments for the evaluative nature of cognition, the model of visual awareness that Murdoch is using is one where vision is itself moralised; where, in other words, the quality and objects of vision depend on the (moral) quality of consciousness of the individual. Visual awareness is *itself*, for Murdoch, a kind of moral awareness, and 'perception is a mode of evaluation' (MGM 315). As we have seen, Murdoch argues that values influence the individual's perception of a given situation, because perception is not the immediate conveyance of impressions on a blank slate, but a matter of 'organising' what confronts us through concepts. This means that several other faculties participate in visual perception.

⁸⁹ Cf. Robjant (2012) on the importance of metaphors in Murdoch and the irreducibility, in some cases, of metaphorical descriptions to non-metaphorical ones, and Diamond (2001a) on the connection between ethical expressions and 'secondary sense', the latter in the context of Wittgenstein's philosophy.

Murdoch's notion of attention, therefore, is neither only metaphorical nor only literal, but swings between the two. Attention, moreover, is not only visual, although visual perception is the main model for it, but involves all the senses and faculties too. What remains to be clarified is how precisely to articulate this moral view of perception, whether moral properties can be 'seen' in the same way as anything else is, or whether they are a matter of interpreting and arranging perceptual properties. I leave these questions for a fuller discussion in Chapter 5.

2.2 The Role of Emotions in Attention

The ambiguity and broader significance of 'vision' in attention reinforces the idea, just noted, that attention does not involve a single faculty, but instead requires the collaboration of the whole person – a *periagoge* or turning around of the individual in her entirety. As Diamond writes, citing Stephen Clark, seeing the world and the values within it correctly requires not a specific set of isolated faculties, but on the contrary it 'depends on our coming to *attend* to the world and what is in it, in a way that will involve the exercise of all our faculties' (Diamond 2001b: 296, emphasis added).⁹⁰

Among the faculties, another important element of attention which makes moral perception or vision possible is emotion or affect. Although the just and objective nature of attention appears to be a reason to consider it, as Peta Bowden does, as a 'detached, intellectual sensibility' (Bowden 1998: 65), attention requires the emotions for two reasons. First, if attention allows us to understand reality, and that includes other people, with their thoughts, needs and emotions, attention has to include an element of empathetic understanding, whereby the recognition of the other's emotions requires an affective response on the individual's part. Compassion is a poignant example, often required by acts of attention, and which is sometimes explicitly invoked by Murdoch as an element of attention alongside love (SG 66). Compassion, as Blum (1994: Chapter 8) presents it, chimes in almost all its aspects with what Murdochian attention requires: compassion is a 'moral emotion'; it goes beyond the mere belief that the other is suffering and requires imaginative understanding; it involves concern for the other person's well-being; it

⁹⁰ See also Blum (1994) on 'the multiplicity of psychic processes and capacities involved in moral perception and moral judgment' (Blum 1994: 47). Blum also links moral perception with the ethics of care, 'for care involves attention to and sensitivity to particular persons and their situations in a way (it is alleged) not fully recognised by impartialist, principle-based moralities' (1994: 50ff).

requires seeing the other as a fellow human being; it involves the disposition to act, if required by the situation. All these elements are also part of attention.

Secondly, emotions are involved in understanding certain situations and in applying certain concepts: as Blum suggests, attention involves ‘concerned responsiveness’ (Blum 1994: 12), which is made possible if the attentive subject, on the one hand, cares about the object of attention (‘to attend is to care’ MGM 179) and about perceiving them correctly, and on the other, is prepared to respond appropriately to what is presented to her, which includes emotional responses. To respond to a friend’s recounting of her grief without any emotion would, in most situations, amount to not having properly understood the friend and her situation at that moment – which indicates that a failure of attention, as the ability to perceive such reality, has occurred.⁹¹

By contrast, in her overview of the idea of ‘ethical attention’, Peta Bowden (1998) suggests that Nussbaum is, rather than Weil and Murdoch, the philosopher who understands attention as including personal and affective elements. Bowden quotes Nussbaum expressing the Aristotelian notion, developed throughout her work, that ‘ethical perception is the “keen responsiveness of intellect, imagination and feeling to the particulars of a situation”’ (Nussbaum 2001: 101, quoted in Bowden 1998: 66). For the reasons above, I believe that such description would also fit very well Murdoch’s notion of attention. Moreover, although Nussbaum is careful to distinguish her Aristotelian conception from what she refers to as the Platonic idea of separation of intellect from the passions (Nussbaum 2001: 15), Murdoch’s own reading of Plato is far from intellectualistic or passionless; on the contrary, Murdoch admires and follows Plato in understanding ‘intellect *as* passion’ (MGM 17). *Eros* drives the individual in both intellectual and worldly pursuits, as we read in the *Symposium*, and even when ‘higher’ intellectual understanding is achieved, such understanding depends on the individual’s love of the Good. Murdoch describes even *noesis*, the contemplation of the Form of the Good, as consisting of ‘*passionate stilled* attention’ (MGM 319), and virtue as ‘passionate attention directed toward what is good’ (MGM 320).

⁹¹ Cf. Alice Cray (2007), who aims to articulate a ‘wider conception of rationality’, inspired by Wittgenstein, which takes rationality and objectivity to be discernible only from within the practises in which the concepts are used. On this model, emotional responses are part of such practises, so that certain concepts are internally related to particular responses, in the absence of which it is questionable if the concept has been correctly understood.

The role of love, both as part of attention and more broadly in Murdoch's philosophy, is difficult to pin down. The definition of attention as 'loving gaze' has prompted various analyses (for ex. Swanton 2003 and Snow 2005) as well as an interest in the concept of love from a Murdochian perspective (Larson 2009, Milligan 2013, 2014). The central difficulty involves the tension between the emotive and individual aspect of love and the requirement of attention to be objective and even detached and impersonal: does a loving gaze involve perceiving the object as better than it is, thus clashing with the requirement of realism? Or, if attention involves a perfectly objective and detached look, what place does love have in it? That is another question I shall discuss in detail below (Ch.4§2).

2.3 The Two Movements of Attention: Love and Unselfing

The question of the compatibility of love and emotion with objectivity and selflessness in attention introduces the two central elements, or 'movements', that make up attention, a negative and a positive one. Calling them 'movements' captures the fact that the two aspects correspond to the direction of the individual's energies. Love is the positive movement or aspect, providing motivation, moving the attentive subject toward the object and sustaining, through desire for the Good, attention to reality. The other aspect involves a more passive state of receptivity, made possible by the withdrawal of the negative influence of the self or ego, and the suppression of self-directed focus, where the energy is involved in keeping a state of suspension, which Murdoch calls 'unselfing'.⁹² The two movements also correspond to two meanings of attention: 'stretching towards' (Lat. *ad-tendere*) and 'waiting'.

The active aspect of attention, love, is understood on the model of Platonic *eros*, but in its purified or best aspects. *Eros* is desire, which, as we saw, is what makes up the individual's quality of consciousness. Given that, according to Murdoch, imagination and values are connected with desires, the good quality of consciousness determined by attention involves the direction of desire toward what is good. The desires are 'purified', and so is consciousness, when the natural self-directed desires which lead to fantasy make room for other-directed desires, which include the wish to see other things as they really are. (I discuss love in attention in Ch.4§2).

⁹² After Weil's notion of *décréation* or 'decreation'.

In its 'negative' aspect, attention involves the suppression of the self-gratifying desires which create fantasy. Selfishness directs desire away from reality and thus from the Good, towards the self, creating a vision of the world interpreted and distorted according to the claims of the self; conversely, 'attention is the effort to counteract such states of illusion' (SG 37). The concept of unselfing is, again, heavily indebted, primarily, to Simone Weil, but also more generally to the tradition of negative theology, including Meister Eckhart: in its theological origin, attention coincides with the attempt to empty the soul so that it may be filled with God (MGM 301). In Murdoch's secular terms, it is the 'checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real' (SG 65), by redirecting desires away from the powerful self toward the real via the Good, i.e. by attending to reality and pursuing the Good, which results in an approach to reality which is more truthful, honest, and unpossessive: 'the ability to let be, consider, create, understand' against 'base emotions, anxiety, fear and misery, obsessive imagery. These are changed by changes in our desires' (MGM 347). This is a central idea for Murdoch: selfishness is the main obstacle to clear vision, so 'moral philosophy is properly ... the discussion of the ego and of the techniques (if any) for its defeat' (SG 52). (Unselfing is discussed further in Chapter 6).

Love and unselfing are both necessary and inseparable elements of attention. On the one hand, the attempt to silence the claims of the ego, although it removes the obstacles from correct perception, is not sufficient for just vision, because, for Murdoch, perception is not only a matter of being 'hit' by the object, but an active and personal process, which requires the desire to see the object truly. Conversely, desiring to understand someone or something, focusing on them, requires putting the ego at least momentarily to a side.

2.4 Creativity and Waiting

On Murdoch's model reality is, as we saw above, not 'given' but 'grasped'. Perception and understanding depend on the individual's imagination and values, and that is why *moral* faculties and attitudes are needed to perceive correctly: faculties and attitudes that foster imagination rather than fantasy, and lead to a creative and truthful construction of reality. If perception is imaginative and therefore creative, what we perceive, *in a sense*, does not exist before the effort of attention: the creative process of the attentive imagination interacts with the object

to make it into something understandable to the subject. This does not mean that there is no object prior to the conceptualising activity, nor that such activity is ‘free’ to make what it likes of the object. There is a truth of the matter about the object, and there are various compatible ways of seeing it, and yet more unfitting and inappropriate conceptualisations of it. Calling perception ‘creative’ refers to the fact that possibilities cannot be fixed in advance, and each object and situation may yield countless possible ways of seeing them, and possible responses that are fitting with them – and just as many that are not. Here the desire to see the object justly suppresses selfish distortions, inhibits certain pictures, and leaps forward by imagining possibilities before they are clearly seen. Diamond expresses this point beautifully in relation to a particular attitude to life which she calls, after Henry James, ‘a sense of adventure’, which can bring out possibilities that require an imaginative and keen ‘moral attention’ in order to be seen:

The sense of adventure ... is closely linked to the sense of life, to a sense of life as lived in a world of wonderful possibilities, but possibilities to be found only by creative response. The possibilities are not lying about on the surface of things. Seeing the possibilities in things is a matter of a kind of transforming perception of them. (Diamond 2001c: 313)

The changing and increasing sense of possibilities is then compared to the paths that a mountain offers to a mountain climber. This analogy brings to the fore another element of the creativity of attention: the fact that skill and competence, with particular situations in life and with related concepts, can increase the range of possibilities one sees, and the more so the more attentively the situations are experienced and observed (what Murdoch calls a ‘deepening’ of concepts). As a symphony may be a confused mass of sounds to someone who is a stranger to that kind of music, while the expert can readily recognise the different movements and component parts, so in life more generally experience changes the nature of what is seen. Yet, in all these cases, the possibilities and aspects that come to the surface are not made up by the subject, but offered by the objects or situations.

These considerations help to explain some rather enigmatic statements in MGM about the necessity of ‘faith’ in other people, and about the mysterious nature of any object of attention: in good (attentive) thinking and artistic creation, ‘something is apprehended as *there* which is not yet *known*’ (MGM 505).⁹³

⁹³ ‘Beliefs about people often proceed ... imaginatively and under direct pressure of will: we have to *attend* to people, we may have to have *faith* in them, and here justice and realism demand the inhibition of certain pictures, the promotion of others’ (EM 199). See also the quote by Paul Valéry,

Attention is required when the object is as yet not clearly seen; it is an imaginative and creative tension toward its object, which often presents itself first as obscure, and is then progressively known, bringing out aspects and possibilities that at first one could at best intuit. Because the possibilities and aspects are not projected in attention but discovered, attention involves patience and *waiting*, particularly in cases where comprehension is difficult and it is tempting to force the object into one interpretation or other. The model of consciousness as ‘grasping’ presented by Murdoch, which pictures the imagination as actively reaching out to the world in concept-making and concept-application, needs to be united with the element of patience or waiting, where the imagination refrains from imposing an order and rather admits its limitations and waits for the correct understanding to become available. In this, we can see another modulation of the two movements, of love and unselfing, described above.

2.5 Activity, Attitude, Faculty

In the discussion so far, I have been talking of attention both as a faculty and as an attitude. As a faculty, attention is understood as a general faculty that encompasses the exercise of different faculties, because the main feature of attention is that of enabling clear perception. As an attitude, attention involves a more general stance of the individual towards reality and can be part of one’s character. Furthermore, attention can also be understood as an activity or action, because it can be exercised voluntarily at particular times by someone who is not generally attentive. Murdoch herself does not characterise attention in any of these ways, calling it only ‘task’ or ‘effort’, yet implying, through her use of the concept in different contexts, the possibility of taking it as a faculty, as an attitude, or as an activity.

As a *faculty*, attention is understood on the model of vision, because attention is what enables the subject to perceive clearly and is available to be exercised, in principle, by everyone. Because attention involves the senses, as well as the intellect and the emotions, it can be understood as a particular configuration of all of these faculties, depending on the object attended to (for instance, empathy may be less relevant when attending to a landscape, and logical intelligence required more in dealing with a mathematical problem, etc.).

repeated more than once in MGM: ‘at its highest point, love is the determination to create the being which it has taken for its object’ (MGM 506).

However, whether or not one exercises attention, and to what degree, depends on other factors. On the one hand, it is possible to develop habits of attention, which then give rise to a disposition similar to virtue, so that attention becomes spontaneous or part of the individual's character. In this case, attention can be considered an *attitude*, the predisposition of the virtuous subject to apprehend the world attentively.

Not all acts of attention are spontaneous, the result of an attentive attitude. Moreover, attention can generally be exercised for limited periods of time. As Simone Weil writes, 'when we become tired, attention is scarcely possible, unless we have already had a good deal of practice'; therefore she recommends 'to press on and loosen up alternately, just as we breathe in and out' (WG 71). While ideally attention would be exercised all the time, in practice it is remarkable if individuals can even attend frequently, both because of the effort involved, and because of the natural inclination towards self-concern and fantasy. Attention, thus understood, is an *act* or *activity*, which has a beginning and end in time – in this sense, it is more fitting to use the verb 'attending', rather than the noun 'attention.'

Because the two latter characterisations of attention, as attitude and as activity, depend on the faculty of attention, I more often characterise attention as a faculty. When the faculty becomes habitual or part of the character of the individual, it is fitting to talk of attention as an attitude; when it is exercised, in punctual acts of attention, often under the command of the will, attention is considered an action or activity. All these meanings are included in the idea of attention, but they are dependent upon the capacity, or faculty, to attend.

2.6 Action, Contemplation and Freedom

One of the most striking as well as controversial features of a morality which revolves around attention is its relation to action. From what has been said so far, it should be clear that one of the defining features of Murdoch's moral philosophy is that it makes it possible to be good or bad without any outward action occurring at all (to show that this is possible is the main aim of the M and D example). This could earn Murdoch's philosophy the label of 'contemplative' ethics, a label which, depending on how it is understood, can be either correct or misleading. If by 'contemplative' we mean a view of ethics as primarily revolving around receptivity

to reality, as Lovibond (2007: 305) takes it, then Murdoch's view, and any morality that revolves around attention as presented here, is contemplative.⁹⁴

On the other hand, the idea of attention does not support a contemplative view of morality if 'contemplative' means that knowledge is the only thing of value and that its links to action are irrelevant. This is because, first, while attention is good in itself, it also directs itself to specific objects, depending on the requirements of the situation, so that the value of the object of attention also matters (See Chapter 4§3); second, as we saw, attention is itself considered an activity, where the effort of 'looking' and the change of vision can be considered as 'inner actions' (cf. SG 19-20); third, attention is closely connected to 'outward action', creating the background upon which actions become possible as well as providing the motivation to act.

Nowhere does Murdoch suggest that action is irrelevant to morality, but only that the main burden of morality is moved 'back', from action to consciousness, or modes of engagement with reality, which precede action. What one does on this model is causally connected with what one thinks, desires and sees – a rather commonsense idea in fact – so that it is that background that is considered most important:⁹⁵ as Simone Weil writes, 'action is the pointer of the balance. One must not touch the pointer, but the weights'.⁹⁶ Responsibility, too, in Murdoch's picture, rests not only on what one does, but also in what one 'sees', since how and what one sees depend on one's desires and one's ability to attend to reality. In this sense, Murdoch claims, 'imagining is a *doing*' (DPR 199). Choice is therefore not the primary concept of morality, because it is now seen to occur upon a world already partly constructed by the individual, through the continual imperceptible activity of imaginative apprehension of the world, which builds up vision and value.⁹⁷ While

⁹⁴ Nor would such a view clash with Anaxagoras's statement, reported by Aristotle, that what mostly makes life valuable is 'contemplating the heavens and the whole order of the universe' (*Eudemian Ethics* 1216a11-14, quoted in Lovibond 2007: 309), provided that the value of contemplation is not seen to exclude or make irrelevant the value of what is contemplated.

⁹⁵ Murdoch holds not only that the inner determines the outer, but also that outward actions also influence the inner and 'release psychic energies that can be released in no other way' (cf. SG 43): inner and outer are therefore in mutual relation. This thought reinforces the idea that attention is not mere inner work, but the inner change that attention both determines and is determined by involves the whole, embodied individual, and acts of will as well as overt actions can contribute to changes in the quality of consciousness.

⁹⁶ Quoted by Murdoch in her review of Weil's *Notebooks*, 'Knowing the Void', EM 158.

⁹⁷ Cf. 'attention imperceptibly builds up structures of value round about us' (MGM 304) and 'the moral life... is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between

it is true that this view includes the idea that moral change can occur without action, it does not make action irrelevant.

This conception of action has considerable impact on the notion of freedom. Contrary to the ‘existentialist’ and analytic views that Murdoch is opposing, on this picture morality does not centre around the will, considered as being free to choose whatever course it desires within a world from which it is separate.⁹⁸ Nor is freedom seen as an illusion, all the options being closed to the individual, as in determinism. Murdoch holds that a more ‘balanced’ view of freedom and necessity can be obtained through focusing on the concept of attention (SG 36-44). On the one hand, on Murdoch’s model we are freer than on the others, because the idea of attention extends freedom to the domain of belief and perception by according an active role to the imagination. Not only what one wills, but also what one sees, is partly up to the individual.

On the other hand, however, on this view the individual is less free than on the ‘existentialist’ model for two reasons. The first is that the individual, including her will, is subject to the mechanical forces of the self or ego, which are likely to lead to fantasy rather than to realism. A truly free vision, therefore, is to this extent free in a negative sense: it is vision liberated from fantasy, and able to see the world clearly. ‘To be free is something like this: to exist sanely without fear and to perceive what is real’ (EM 201).⁹⁹ There is a reality, including a moral reality, which is available for the individual to see; but it is possible to ignore it by allowing the desire for self-gratification to obscure one’s vision of reality. That would be, not only a submission to mechanical fantasy, but also, in a sense, an impossible act, where will runs against reality, desiring something that is not and therefore it cannot achieve.

the occurrence of explicit moral choices’ (SG 37): it is what happens between those moments that is crucial.

⁹⁸ As we shall see in Ch.4 §5, the concept of will has a peculiar and ambiguous role in Murdoch, both positive and negative. She considers will to be mostly an ‘immediate straining’ against the background of consciousness. For a different interpretation of the relation between Murdoch’s view of freedom and existentialism, see Richard Moran (2012), who argues that the existentialist’s conception of freedom is closer to Murdoch’s own than she acknowledges: existentialist freedom is not, for Moran, unbounded choice, as Murdoch claims, but it is deeply constrained by the situation, thus bringing it closer to – although still different from – Murdoch’s ‘obedience’.

⁹⁹ ‘Freedom (in this sense) is freedom from bad habits and bad desire, and is brought about in all sorts of ways by impulses of love, rational reflection, new scenery, conscious ad deliberate formation of new attachments and so on’ (MGM 300).

This is the second reason why on Murdoch's model we are less free than on her reading of the existentialist one: our overt choices and deliberations can only work with the elements of the world that we see – upon the background of our consciousness, which determines what we see. In the most successful cases of attention, reality will be revealed to the attentive subject, which includes, crucially, the responses that such reality calls for or merits:¹⁰⁰ 'if I attend properly I will have no choices, and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at' (SG 40). In this thought, Murdoch unites necessity and freedom – a special notion of freedom – in the concept of attention, and the 'obedience' to reality that successful attention engenders. The work of attention, engaging the whole individual, including will and desires, reveals a world that the attentive subject, being a lover of the Good and thus of truth, cannot will not to be or to be other than what it is. Attention unites the recognition of reality with the acceptance of it. Most of us rebel with our will against this necessity, but we are not less bound for that (reality is what it is); the attentive individual understands and accepts this necessity, and in this way is freer than others, because her will conforms to the way things are.

These thoughts also include a form of motivational internalism: the idea that attending properly gives one 'no choices' means that once reality is clearly seen by the subject, the proper response and action will at the same time become apparent. Attention to reality provides not only the correct perception, but also the reasons as well as the motivation to act in a certain way. This idea seems to capture a common experience, the feeling that one not so much wants to, but has to, respond to something in a certain way: that any other course of action appears not so much irrational or undesirable, but impossible. Murdoch attempts to explain this experience with the Weilian idea of 'obedience', as we shall see in §3 below.

2.7 Attention and Other Concepts

Lastly, it is important to note that with the idea of attention, and with the background on which it rests, Murdoch is not seeking to provide an exhaustive model of morality, as she herself acknowledges (SG 43). Her focus is on arguing for how evaluation extends much further than judgment and deliberation to almost all modes of cognition and perception, and on drawing out the consequences of that

¹⁰⁰ 'The *details* of our world deserve our respectful and loving attention' (MGM 377). Cf. McDowell (2001c) on the idea of moral reality as 'meriting' certain responses, and Chapter 5 below.

moral-epistemological claim, including painting a metaphysical picture that serves as a background to the experience of goodness as ‘out there’ and absolutely important and binding. In this picture, attention is the central mode of moral awareness and the basis for moral action. However, it is also recognised that other forms of moral thinking, such as the idea of duty and utilitarian considerations, are important and even necessary to morality: ‘we do not ... have to choose between attention and duty. We live with both’ (MGM 119).¹⁰¹

Despite her acknowledgment that fostering moral perception in the form of habits of attention is not the only way to become morally better, Murdoch still considers correct perception as primary to duty and consequences, for two reasons: on the one hand, clear perception of a situation is required for the application of rules; on the other, such perception is itself morally laden, so that duty, for instance, does not merely pick out ‘facts’, but is influenced by a vision of a situation which itself contains value: ‘the sharp call of unwelcome duty ... descends upon a countryside that already has its vegetation and contours’ (MGM 141).

One reason for accommodating other moral theories is that perfect attention is an ideal state, and perfect moral perception an ideal achievement. Therefore we need, for instance, to heed the call of duty when our perceptual faculties are blunt and attention is poor. The weekly call to one’s grandmother, for example, may not always be the result of clear perception of her wish or need for that conversation, but rather result from intellectually ‘knowing’ what one has to do.¹⁰² While it is true that duties themselves are understood by the individual against the background of the general quality of consciousness, yet they remain discrete commands that can be appealed to even when consciousness directs desires elsewhere (MGM 302). Even then, however, as Murdoch recognises, it is hard to know when to follow our consciousness, and when to follow duty (SG 44).¹⁰³ Presumably, in a context when reasons for action are given by correctly perceived reality, one should follow one’s consciousness when one is confident that impediments to clear perception have

¹⁰¹ ‘A realistic morality cannot dispense with the idea of duty ... a part of every moral philosophy must be utilitarian’, MGM 53). For further observations about the relation between Murdoch’s views and other moral theories, see Roger Crisp (2012).

¹⁰² Indeed, acting out of duty despite one’s desires or inclinations is for Kant where the value of the good will is most apparent: ‘under certain subjective limitations and hindrances, which, however, far from concealing it and making it unrecognisable, rather elevate it by contrast and let it shine forth all the more brightly’ (Kant 1998, G 4:397).

¹⁰³ The question of how to combine attention with duty requires more space than I can devote to it here, but it has been addressed by Antonaccio (2000: 155-163).

been removed; of course, the possibility of error is not eliminated, only reasonably attenuated.

It is a merit of Murdoch's picture is that it can explain and to an extent incorporate concepts belonging to other theories; the other, arguably greater merit, is that it seeks to explain and do justice to the ordinary experience of morality, including placing it, in Socratic fashion (not asking 'What should one do?' but 'How should one live?'), within the whole of the life of the individual.

3 Simone Weil's Legacy

In discussing attention and Murdoch's philosophy I have made frequent reference to Simone Weil. Much of Murdoch's thought bears the influence of Weil, but it is in the concept of attention, with the correlate notions of love and unselfing (*décréation*, also translated as 'decreation', but which Murdoch prefers to translate in more secular and modern terms as 'unselfing'), and its consequent idea of obedience, that the influence is most obvious.¹⁰⁴ In what follows, I focus on attention and obedience, because Weil's legacy in Murdoch's concepts of love and unselfing is discussed, respectively, in Ch.4§3 and Ch.6. My main reason for focusing on Murdoch's concept of attention rather than on Weil's is that the present work aims to propose a conception of a secular morality, while in Weil attention is embedded in the context of a religious metaphysics. Indeed, part of Murdoch's endeavour seems to be to translate the notion of attention introduced by Weil into a secular context and a secular metaphysics. Because Weil is such a profound influence on Murdoch, and because in Weil it is possible to find further elaborations and clarifications concerning the idea of attention and the related concepts, it is nonetheless helpful to briefly explore Weil's concept of attention and to assess to what extent Murdoch inherits it or diverges from it.

Murdoch first acknowledges her debt to Simone Weil in SG, where she claims that the word 'attention', as she has been using it, is 'borrowed' from Weil (SG 34). Weil is mentioned at various places in SG and MGM, but never discussed at any length, so the work of comparison between them cannot entirely rest on

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Sabina Lovibond: 'Murdoch's most self-conscious borrowings are centred on the themes of *attention* and *obedience*' (Lovibond 2011: 29). Kate Larson (2009) has devoted a study to the comparison of Weil and Murdoch on the subject of love, which for Larson comprises the idea of attention. In this work, conversely, I consider love to be an aspect of attention, although the relation between the two is not straightforward (See Ch.4 §3).

Murdoch's own word. Weil's influence on Murdoch, however, is obvious and pervasive.¹⁰⁵ Sissela Bok (2005) has imagined a dialogue between Murdoch and Weil, where the moral crux is reached in the agreement on the Weilian idea that moral responses follow directly from apprehension of reality; with other people, this manifests itself, essentially, in 'that halt, that interval of hesitation, wherein lies all our consideration for our brothers in humanity' (Weil 1956: 33, quoted in Bok 2005: 74). The recognition of the other, which both issues in and involves respect, is made possible by the truth-revealing faculty of attention: here, the truth of the other person's independent existence and their autonomy, posing themselves as obstacles to our own will, as Weil frequently reminds us.¹⁰⁶

In the opening pages of 'On God and Good' in SG, Murdoch states that, in what follows, her 'debt to SW will become evident' (SG 50). After a critique of the 'prevalent picture' of moral philosophy, which divides fact and value and presents the will as sole bearer of value and completely independent, Murdoch presents her own idea of what morality and moral improvement are like, based on attention, the very concept she borrows from Weil. Moral improvement, understood as purification of energy, is, as we saw, modelled on prayer or 'attention to God' (SG 55, echoing the title of one of Simone Weil's best known works). The dense passage shows that Murdoch's very conception of human beings as 'obscure systems of energy', made up of an energy which is 'naturally selfish', is inherited not only from Freud, but to a large extent also from Weil. According to Weil, the self has no substance, but is a system of forces governed by desire. The energy of the self is naturally self-directed, and the result of this is de-realisation: a vision of the world distorted according to one's desires. The ideas that our desires determine our quality of consciousness, and that by nature those desires are selfish and thus unrealistic, are central to both Weil and Murdoch. What can purify such selfish desires, Murdoch writes following Weil, is attention.

The difference between Murdoch and Weil lies in their conception of the self, which Murdoch considers with a little more benevolence than Weil does. Although Murdoch agrees with Weil that the self is the main source of moral error,

¹⁰⁵ Murdoch admitted in an interview that her relationship with Weil was 'total love at first sight' (Griffin 1993: 58).

¹⁰⁶ On the idea of other people and well as objects as obstacles to our will, see Winch (1989: Chapter 9).

she does not wish to completely eliminate all personal perspective.¹⁰⁷ Murdoch's notion of attention is similarly slightly less demanding or more 'human' than Weil's, taking the shape of a slower, piecemeal exercise, conducted imperfectly in the midst of various impediments. As Peta Bowden observes,

Where Weil portrays attention straining patiently, but inspirationally, against the untamed impulses of the ego, Murdoch pictures the continuous drudgery of the inexhaustible demand to attend 'without rigidity' at the sheer 'contingent' and infinite detail of the world, and its human personalities. Here the work of attention is an everyday, cumulative labour in uncertainty ... rather than the revelatory gymnastics described by, and familiar to Weil. (Bowden 1998: 64)

Although Bowden overestimates the extent to which Weil's notion of attention involves an active effort, which for Weil has to be a negative, patient and open kind of effort and thus far from the idea of 'gymnastics', it is clear that Murdoch's model, for all its perfectionism, is more tolerant of the limitations of human beings, and her idea of attention more piecemeal and ordinary.

Weil sees the universe as deterministic, dominated by the 'necessity' determined by God in God's withdrawal (Tzimtzum).¹⁰⁸ Human beings, too, partake of necessity, except for one spark of freedom, their autonomy to desire: although human beings do not have the power to control how things go in the world, they can choose which way to turn their desires. The choices are two: they can desire to obey necessity (God's will), or they can desire not to obey.¹⁰⁹ The second option is chosen as a result of the human illusion of being positioned at the centre of the world, which makes the individual believe that she has more importance, power, freedom and autonomy than she really has. Since it is not given to us not to obey the laws of necessity, and the illusion of freedom and centrality is itself a form of obedience to the laws of necessity (our 'gravity', in Weil's words, which

¹⁰⁷ See Ch.6 below for an analysis of Murdoch's attempt to retain something akin to Weil's 'impersonality' in attention, combined with an acceptance, unlike Weil, of individual perspective and personality.

¹⁰⁸ The idea of Tzimtzum comes from Isaac Luria's Kabbalistic doctrine. The Hebrew word 'Tzimtzum' has the dual meaning of 'withdrawal' and 'concealment', and refers to the idea that the world exists as a result of the withdrawal of the only true reality, God; thus God is necessarily concealed from creation, which has the character of negation.

¹⁰⁹ Weil: 'man can never escape obedience to God. A creature cannot not obey. The only choice offered to man as an intelligent and free creature, is to desire obedience or not to desire it. If he does not desire it, he perpetually obeys nevertheless, as a thing subject to mechanical necessity. If he does desire obedience, he remains subject to mechanical necessity, but a new necessity is added on, a necessity constituted by the laws that are proper to supernatural things. Certain actions become impossible for him, while others happen through him, sometimes despite him' (WG 88). Cf. SG 40: 'the ideal situation is ... to be represented as a sort of necessity ... patient loving regard ... presents the will – as something very much more like "obedience"'.

Murdoch rephrases in modern psychological terms as ‘natural self-centredness’), the only real exercise of freedom is to desire to obey. Such desire of obedience is attention: an attitude of the whole being whereby one is ready and willing to accept and acknowledge whatever is presented to one. In other words, attention is openness to and desire for the truth, which for Weil is God’s will. It thus becomes evident that already in Weil the idea of attention unites intellectual and moral elements (cf. Vetö 1994: 41), in making understanding dependent on the exercise of will and desire: to grasp the truth is a moral choice depending on one’s desire to obey God’s will.

Murdoch translates these ideas into her own secular metaphysics. Being unable to justify the imperative of conforming one’s will to reality by appealing to the authority of the real understood as God’s creation, Murdoch returns (even there, however, inspired by Weil) to Plato and the value of knowledge, or the idea that to be truthful and to see things as they are is good in itself (as we saw in Ch. 2 and 3). Inheriting Weil’s moral psychology about the self-centred tendency of human beings, and the consequences drawn by Weil as to the de-realising effects of such tendency, Murdoch unites these ideas with the moral importance of reality in her secular reading of attention. In both, attention requires self-mastery and at the same time includes a desire for the Good, which leads to a clearer appreciation of reality. To obey, as part of attention, is for Murdoch nothing more than to want to see things as they are, without distorting them.

We can see that the absence in Murdoch of Weil’s idea that one ought to not only desire to see reality as it is, but also desire things to be as they are, prevents the former from endorsing the disturbing possibility that obedience takes the shape of an acceptance which requires the attentive subject to not want to change anything; on that view, evil would also have to be desired, being part of creation. While it is not clear that Weil endorses such a conclusion,¹¹⁰ Murdoch only argues for the importance of knowledge, or wanting to see things as they are. It is compatible with this claim that, while seeing what is there, one may want things to be other than they are. Indeed, according to Murdoch’s motivational internalism, the nature of what is perceived carries within the appropriate reaction, which can involve rejection or the attempt to change it.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Weil, NB 38-9. For a different interpretation, which does not take Weil to be advocating a passive acceptance of evil, see Winch 1989: 177-8.

The element of patient waiting in attention is also derived from Weil. In RRSS Weil recommends the practise of attention as the crucial element to any intellectual discipline, necessary if any real progress is to be made.¹¹¹ In a beautiful passage, Weil describes attention thus:

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object. It means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it. (WG 72)

Weil's conception of attention is quoted a few times in MGM as 'perception without reverie' (MGM 112, 118, 163) and 'attention: not to think about' (MGM 118), expressing the importance of the element of 'waiting' in attention. Thought, whatever its object, is inclined to reach out and grasp, hurrying to find a solution that may quell the painfulness of uncertainty, or that may satisfy by fitting one's pre-conceived schema, etc. This tendency is part of what Weil and Murdoch see as the natural self-centredness and self-protection that lead us into error. Attention purifies the energy of the individual by turning it outward, away from the self. Weil: 'attention must always be directed toward the object ... never toward the self' (N 128) and Murdoch: 'The direction of attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from self' (SG 66).

This open waiting is combined, in the idea of attention of both Weil and Murdoch, with an eager desire for goodness and truth. Attention is 'active engagement and passive receptivity' as Bowden puts it (1998: 62). Attention is not simply passive contemplation, because it is desire for the Good (or God), but at the same time it is waiting and receptive, because its object is – by definition – something that one does not yet know. In RRSS, Weil warns that attention should not be 'muscular effort' and yet she observes that it is, at the same time, the greatest of all efforts (RRSS 70-1). The effort of attention is, rather, a 'negative effort' or a 'passive activity', led by desire.

The idea that the desire that makes up attention is to be directed to something absolute and perfect is also inherited by Murdoch from Weil, together

¹¹¹ Cf. Murdoch: 'All just vision, even in the strictest problems of the intellect ... is a moral matter' (SG 70).

with the difficult dialectic between attention to God and to God's creatures, reworked by Murdoch in terms of attention to the Good or to the world. Although God or Good is the proper and ultimate object of desire – an idea they both take from Plato – God and Good are also not objects of perception, which is what attention aims at. Given its complexity, I consider the question of whether it is Good or the world that we should attend to separately below (Ch.4§3).

Weil's concept of attention is a moral concept, and as such it is taken up by Murdoch in the context of her own thought. Although I have hinted at the idea that Murdoch secularises Weilian attention, the difference between that religious and the secular perspective is not clear-cut, given Murdoch's emphasis on the importance of a religious attitude and the idea of a transcendent absolute governing human life. What is clear for both philosophers is the centrality of attention in the good life. Weil brings it to the fore, drawing its consequences in the practical realm, with reference to our recognition of other people, especially those who are suffering (for which she uses as example the parable of the Good Samaritan). With this thought, we return to Bok's insight quoted at the beginning: attention is the faculty or attitude by which we see the world as it is, and that includes other people and their situation, as well as the important fact that they are autonomous beings, with a will of their own which can contrast with ours – something which is not at all easy to do, and which very often does not happen. The Samaritan, in Weil's reading, is able to *see* in the lump of flesh by the roadside a human being, and by this loving and attentive gaze restore his humanity to him. More generally, to be attentive, Weil writes, means to ask the sufferer 'What are you going through?' which is very difficult because it involves opening ourselves up to suffering and 'decreating' ourselves or putting ourselves to one side, by letting the other make an impression on us (WG 75).

The actions that follow, helping the sufferer, clothing them, taking them home, are themselves, according to Weil, a form of obedience that goes together with attention. Earlier I spoke of attention as 'obedience', because it involves wanting to conform one's thought to the way the world is. There is also a second aspect of obedience, which involves not only the mind, but also action, part of the motivational internalism mentioned above. Attention can be seen as both comprising obedience and as generating it: to attend is to want to see clearly, and what is seen will indicate what needs to be done. If attention is understood as

revealing reality, including a moral order, then the natural continuation of acts of attention will be acts that carry out what the moral order requires. For Murdoch, attention reveals a previously unknown reality, and it is within such a reality that action takes place. If what one can see includes moral properties, and on the premise that we all desire the Good, then ‘one is compelled almost automatically by what one can see’ (SG 37). ‘The ultimate condition to be aimed at’ (SG 40), Murdoch concludes, is one of ‘having no choices’ and thus one of obedience, in a way that need not be sinister: to obey the moral reality one sees is to be moved by the perceived good and to act on the possibilities offered. The claim that ‘if I attend properly I have no choices’ (SG 40) points to an ideal state, one in which the perceived reality dictates the moral requirements. (This point is explored further in Chapter 5).

From this brief comparison of Weil and Murdoch we can see how deeply indebted Murdoch is to Weil, even when the debt is not acknowledged. Referring to Weil is crucial for understanding the idea of attention as developed by Murdoch, not only because that is the context in which Murdoch encountered it, but also because Weil on some occasions provides considerations not found in Murdoch that can clarify the ideas she borrows. That is why, in this work, I draw from Weil whenever it is helpful to do so in order to explain Murdoch’s idea. Most of the time, and unless otherwise stated, Weil’s ideas are compatible with and support Murdoch’s.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have introduced the notion of attention within the context of Murdoch’s moral psychology and against the backdrop of her metaphysical picture discussed in the previous chapter. Murdoch suggests a view of the individual as an organic unity, where consciousness is the locus of the individual’s morality. The subject is responsible for her ‘quality of consciousness’ and can alter it by altering her desires and the objects of her thoughts. Murdoch’s idea is that what one desires and occupies oneself with, which is determined by one’s values, builds up the quality of one’s consciousness. Not only what, but how one desires and thinks, is crucial in defining one’s background of consciousness, from which individual acts and thoughts emerge. The most powerful force in this picture is the self, seen as a centripetal force which turns desires and concerns towards itself, thus altering the

individual's perception of reality in search of self-gratification. To turn the focus and concern away from the ego is, for Murdoch, the main task of morality and coincides with attention.

Murdoch sees morality as revolving around the relation of the individual's mind to reality, whereby goodness consists in ordering consciousness in such a way that it grasps reality correctly, and such configuration of consciousness is attention. Attention engages the whole individual, senses, intellect and emotions, so that when attentive perception is achieved, the motivating and normative qualities of the objects also become apparent. Thus, attention is not mere contemplation divorced from action, but is itself an active pursuit, closely connected with the nature of what is perceived, in that it determines the possibilities and motivations for action. A morality based on attention, however, does not need to exclude moral concepts and practises that derive from other theories. Murdoch is proposing an alternative, but not an exhaustive picture. While attention is here presented as the central faculty in morality, it cannot do *all* the moral work. There is space, therefore, for acting out of duty, or for consequentialist considerations, alongside or in the absence of the moral perception that attention enables.

Murdoch's notion of attention draws heavily on that of Simone Weil, who, however, develops the concept in the context of a religious metaphysics. Nonetheless, Weil's specification of the idea of attention as one of self-withdrawal or emptying, and her delineation of a motivational internalist conception, where full attention leaves the individual with no choice, are helpful to understand Murdoch's own thought in places where Murdoch herself does not elaborate further.

Having introduced the concept of attention on the background of Murdoch's moral psychology, and justified its importance through an account of her metaphysics, it is possible to move on in the next chapters to explore further what attention involves and how it operates. I shall begin, in Chapter 4, by addressing three central questions that arise if attention is considered as a moral concept: how attention can be both a loving and a truthful gaze; whether the proper object of attention is the Good or reality, or both; and to what extent attention can be willed, and thus something one can be responsible for.

Chapter 4

Attention as a Moral Concept: Love, Objects, Will

Introduction

The previous chapter analysed Murdoch's concept of attention. In what follows, I address three questions central to the importance of attention in morality: first, how attention can be at the same time, as Murdoch describes it, loving and accurate; second, whether Murdoch's claim that attention is directed at the Good can be combined with the idea that attention is what discloses moral reality, and is therefore directed at the world rather than at the ideal; lastly, whether there is a tension between attention as a concept that can challenge the centrality of the will in morality and the exercise of the will in directing attention.

The questions are introduced by explaining why the concept of attention that I am investigating is a specifically moral concept, and to what extent, as such, it departs from its use in ordinary language and in empirical psychology. The exposition also aims at defining the concept of attention by selecting specific aspects from Murdoch's sometimes inconsistent usage. The clarification of the moral aspects of attention also links together the three questions introduced above, according to the requirements that will emerge for classifying attention as a moral concept: the requirement to include the desire to be and do good (love); to aim at and make available the truth about the object of attention (reality); and to be something one can be responsible for (which can be easily justified if attention is under the control of the will).

Murdoch does not explicitly address the above questions, so the analysis in this chapter is a development and exploration of the ideas that can be found in her work, trying to solve difficulties and fill gaps in a way that is compatible with Murdoch's account, but not explicitly suggested in it. The aim is to achieve a more coherent and thorough understanding of attention as a moral concept.

1 Attention as a Moral Concept

The moral concept of attention is derived from the concept as used in ordinary language and coincides with it in most respects. However, as the ordinary concept of attention tends to be morally neutral, there are also some important differences

which make the concept as presented here a specifically moral one. Similarly, the concept of attention in empirical psychology overlaps to a large extent both with the ordinary language concept and with the present understanding, so that psychological studies are useful to understand the moral nature of attention, but the psychological concept also departs from the moral one in some respects that need to be highlighted.

In psychology, attention is generally defined as something which a) excludes to a certain extent other stimuli, and b) is generally under the control of the subject (although this is not uncontroversial): ‘attention has been used to refer to all those aspects of human cognition that the subject can control ... and to all aspects of cognition having to do with limited resources or capacity, and methods of dealing with such constraints’ (Shiffrin 1988: 739, quoted in Styles 2006: 1). These two aspects are also part of the ordinary language concept. Under this definition, the meaning of attention is compatible with *some cases* of what I am exploring. Examples of virtuous attention that fit the above definition include: voluntarily focusing on a conversation with a friend who is asking for advice on an important matter, excluding other thoughts and stimuli to be able to attend to the other person (on the assumption that that is the most relevant element of the current situation); attending to a work of art, where the subject is consciously engaged with the artwork to the exclusion of all the rest (assuming she is not neglecting something important), so as to be able to gain an increasingly accurate and insightful appreciation of it.

However, the moral concept also differs both from its ordinary language and its psychological counterparts in a number of ways. Although psychologists describe attention as something that is under the subject’s control, that can also include potential or very slight control. Therefore, in psychology, differently from ordinary language, attention is also considered as something that takes place even in extremely ‘distracted’ states of consciousness – including ‘reverie’ and daydreaming – where attention is not absent but short-lived and divided among various stimuli.¹¹² By contrast, daydreams and reverie, on the present account, are precisely the opposite of attention. This aspect is not found in the ordinary language concept, where attention is contrasted with distraction. The moral concept of

¹¹² See for ex. Ward (1918: Chapter 3) and Evans (1970: 91), who hold that attention is omnipresent because it is necessary for consciousness.

attention, too, does not refer to something that everyone naturally does, but it also differentiates itself from the ordinary language concept because, being a normative concept, it refers to something one *ought* to do (cf. EM 199); hence, it is something that one can – to an extent, as we shall see – either avoid or choose to practise, and therefore something one can be held responsible for. But it is also something that can be trained, so that the deliberate aspect of attention is either moved back to the building of habit, or significantly weakened (as we shall see below).

The moral concept of attention is both broader and narrower than both its ordinary language and its scientific counterpart in relation to the two criteria specified at the start of this section, namely the exclusion of other stimuli and the ability to control it. It is broader because, while sometimes attention involves selectivity and resulting exclusivity, in other cases it is precisely the opposite. In psychology attention is the explanatory factor for the ‘selective directedness of our mental lives’ (see Mole 2012: 201), what makes us focus on one thing (or more than one, in ‘divided attention’) to the exclusion of others, along the lines of the famous ‘bottleneck model’ (Broadbent 1958).¹¹³ There, it is essential that attention has a specific object or a limited number of objects. Murdoch and Weil’s notion, on the other hand, includes the idea of waiting and the possibility for ‘open’ attention, which is held in suspension and not fixed on any particular object until the salience of the various objects has become manifest (as we saw in Ch.3§2.3).¹¹⁴ For Weil, attention also includes attending to God, which includes emptying the mind of all thoughts (cf. Ch.3§3). The open and receptive state that Weil and Murdoch describe is, fittingly with their shared interest in Buddhist thought, rather akin to the meditative state (called by neuroscientists ‘open monitoring’), which involves ‘the non-reactive monitoring of experience’ and an attempt not to control or influence whatever may present itself to consciousness (Lutz et al. 2008: 163). Another reason to consider the normative concept of attention as broader than the scientific one is that the normative concept involves the whole individual (cf.

¹¹³ D.E. Broadbent (1958) suggested that attention depends on ‘capacity limitations’ which form a ‘bottleneck’ through which selection occurs. The model, however, is recently being challenged. On selectivity, cf. also Johnson and Proctor (2004).

¹¹⁴ The idea of waiting is also present in the ordinary use of ‘attendre’ in French, where it means ‘to wait’, and only secondarily ‘to pay attention’, although the French noun ‘attention’ translates as ‘attention’.

Ch.3§2.2), while psychologists and cognitive scientists normally study attention in relation to particular senses.

The normative concept of attention is also narrower than the ordinary language and psychological one, for two reasons. One is that moral attention is limited to its truth-revealing capacity (the capacity to put the subject in the most receptive state to be able to grasp truth); the other is that moral attention is motivated by a desire for the Good or, more generally, because it includes the intention and attitude behind it. It is possible, for example, ordinarily to talk about a sadist paying close attention to the sufferings of someone else in order to augment them. Such use of the concept is not appropriate on the understanding of attention that, drawing on Murdoch, I present here. Two fundamental features of the present concept of attention are that, on the one hand, it is not directed by selfish concerns, manifest in this case in the self-gratifying desire of watching someone suffer, and on the other, it is driven by *eros* or desire for the Good, manifest in the desire to be just to its object.

1.1 Clarifying Murdoch's Usage

Although the present clarification of the concept of attention is conducted in accordance with Murdoch's ideas, her own use of the word 'attention' is not consistent. Blum (2012) has observed the inconsistencies in relation to Murdoch's varying use of visual metaphors.¹¹⁵ Blum attempts to disentangle the different visual metaphors in order to differentiate between three notions: perception considered neutrally as to its moral quality and its truthfulness; successful, i.e. clear and just, perception; and the attempt to achieve such perception.

As Blum notes, Murdoch sometimes refers to the first notion by using 'seeing' and 'vision', taken as activities that present to us the world we have partly created for ourselves through the use (either good or bad) of the imagination. Blum calls this the 'subjectively perceived'. This idea is also expressed in verb form by the use of 'looking', which Murdoch contrasts directly with attention: 'I would like on the whole to use 'attention' as a good word and use some more general term like 'looking' as the neutral word' (SG 37). Elsewhere, however, Murdoch uses

¹¹⁵ Although Murdoch uses 'attention' in the context of visual metaphors, it needs to be remembered that attention is not only a visual phenomenon, but can apply to other senses as well, indeed to the whole person. Cf. Ch.3§2.1.

‘looking’ in the same ‘morally good’ sense as attention: ‘can we not give a more balanced and illuminating account (of freedom and choice)? ... We can if we simply introduce into the picture the idea of attention, or looking’ (SG 36).¹¹⁶

Yet more confusingly, ‘attention’ is also, conversely, used by Murdoch to refer to the same general activity which ‘looking’, ‘vision’ and ‘seeing’ variously refer to, considered neutrally as to its moral character: ‘if we consider what the work of attention is like, how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us ...’ (SG 37). In those passages, Murdoch’s is arguing that our epistemic attitudes determine the world we live in: what we see – what concepts we use to describe something – depends on how we approach it, what matters to us, what interests we have, what we want, etc. Since attention is normally presented by Murdoch as the epistemic attitude that yields a truthful apprehension of reality, it becomes apparent that in the quote above Murdoch is slipping from her normal usage of the word, and using it in the ordinary sense. As we saw above, in contrast with the psychological concept of attention, while we are all the time building up structures of value, because all the time we are ‘looking’, engaging *in some way* with reality, it cannot be said, in the moral sense of attention, that ‘attention goes on all the time’, because it is not the case that we are always perceiving justly and truthfully, nor attempting to do so (cf. Blum 2012: 312-3, fn.9).

What is indeed constant is not truthful apprehension (attention), but the requirement to attend: ‘the task of attention goes on all the time and at apparently empty and everyday moments we are “looking”, making those little peering efforts of imagination that have such important cumulative results’ (SG 43). The task is omnipresent. Our fulfilment of it, however, is not. Therefore, as Murdoch writes, what goes on all the time is either attention or its lack: ‘at every moment we are “attending” or failing to attend’ (MGM 296).¹¹⁷

The recommendation to constantly attempt to see justly takes us to the third kind of visual metaphor isolated by Blum, distinguishing between attention as successful perception of reality, and attention as the attempt to see clearly. Murdoch sometimes uses ‘attention’, as well as ‘looking’ and ‘vision’, to refer to both. Blum suggests that such inconsistent use can be harmonised by considering the

¹¹⁶ Cf. also MGM 24.

¹¹⁷ Blum (2012) does not seem to notice the importance of the word ‘task’ in this passage, and quotes it instead as another example of Murdoch’s use of ‘attention’ in a neutral sense.

‘magnetic’ role of the Good in Murdoch’s philosophy: given that Murdoch believes that the Good exerts a ‘magnetic pull’ on every individual, Blum concludes that ‘there is a sort of tendency ... for outward focus to become attention – to successfully grasp another’s reality’ (Blum 2012: 311). Given Murdoch’s equally strong arguments about the tendency to fantasise, this solution fails to have conclusive appeal. Moreover, Blum is talking about the tendency of ‘outward focus’ to become attention, where ‘outward focus’ is ambiguous: if it means only focus on something external to the individual, it is still possible that the object of focus is seen through a self-gratifying lens; on the other hand, genuine outward focus, without self-interest, is already akin to attention, so it does not need to become attention. A more plausible solution is to tolerate the inconsistency, and explain it, more simply, by the fact that ‘attention’ is an ordinary word, and Murdoch’s oscillation between the two meanings indicates her use of the word sometimes in the ordinary sense, sometimes in the moral one inherited from Weil. That also helps to explain why sometimes she qualifies ‘attention’, to yield the specialised meaning I am discussing: ‘just attention’ (SG 38), ‘animal attentiveness ... vigilance’ (MGM 246), ‘concentrated attention (loving care)’ (MGM 505), ‘(virtuous) attention’ (MGM 39), ‘attentive waiting’ (MGM 323), etc.

Moreover, the requirements for attention as a moral concept that Blum sets up are themselves debatable: its ‘success’ in bringing about clear vision, and its being deliberate. Blum sees the distinction between ‘attention’ and ‘looking’ as hinging on the success of the former in yielding clear perception, while, at the same time, he holds them both to be deliberate. I shall now focus on the success requirement, and discuss the role of the will in attention in a separate section below (§5). Murdoch, however, does not claim that if we attend then we *will* see clearly; at most, she claims that clear vision is the *natural* result of attention (MGM 52). But attention cannot guarantee success: it is the necessary condition for clear vision, but not sufficient. Attention consists in putting oneself in the best possible receptive state for grasping reality correctly. Whether clear vision ensues is also determined by other factors, for example the overall background of consciousness prior to the act of attention, including one’s epistemic habits, as well as mere chance and

unspecifiable factors – what Murdoch calls ‘grace’, understood as the mysterious answer to the call that is attention (MGM 23).¹¹⁸

Another reason for not considering attention as an entirely successful activity comes from Murdoch’s metaphysics and her perfectionistic idea of the transcendence of reality: if knowing something is a constantly perfectible endeavour, as Murdoch claims, because the concepts through which we grasp the world can always be grasped more fully or ‘deeply’, and because some object (most objects, but chief among them are, for Murdoch, human beings and human situations) are so complex that it is unrealistic to imagine a complete understanding of them, then the knowledge that attention enables can only be partial, and so can the success of attention. Murdoch takes attention as being a concrete requirement for every moral subject, and as such having degrees of success and constant perfectibility: ‘the attempt (usually only partially successful) to attend ... purely, without self, brings with it an increasing awareness’ (SG 70).¹¹⁹ Thus Murdoch calls attention an ‘effort’ (SG 37) and puts forth the requirement to ‘*try to see justly*’ (SG 40, emphasis added). With these caveats, it is of course true that attention is distinguished from looking or focusing because it is both the necessary endeavour, and the likeliest of all, to bring about clear vision. Some degree of success, therefore, is embedded in the idea of attention, particularly in contrast with other cognitive states and activity. What is too demanding is to claim that attention can be completely successful.

The relative success of attention does not regard only the knowledge it makes available, but also the improvement of the attentive subject’s consciousness. Attention is instrumental in making the individual virtuous, in which respect it is more likely to be successful, because every attempt at attention leaves a trace in consciousness and ‘trains’ it. As Weil writes, in relation to attention in school studies, ‘it does not even matter much whether we succeed in finding the solution or understanding the proof, although it is important to try really hard to do so. Never in any case whatever is a genuine effort of the attention wasted ... Without our knowing or feeling it, this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the

¹¹⁸ Grace is an important element in the success of attention for Weil, who, however, can explain the concept more easily within her religious metaphysics. In Murdoch, grace looks, to a certain extent, similar to chance.

¹¹⁹ Nussbaum (1990a) is concerned with the necessarily flawed nature of consciousness and attention itself, as presented by Henry James’s novel *The Golden Bough*.

soul' (RRSS 67). Every act of attention is worthwhile, even if its object is but dimly perceived, because cultivating attention makes the subject better – more selfless, more concerned with others, and also more likely to continue attending and to see clearly on other occasions.

As the consciousness-improving element of attention indicates, besides the relative success, the main difference between attention and 'looking' lies, I suggest, in the intention. The effort to attend is motivated and accompanied by a 'real desire' for Good in relation to the object, which includes wanting to be good to the object: hence the 'just and loving gaze'. The desire for goodness includes, and indeed starts from, the desire to see the object truly, as it is. When one only looks, on the other hand, one may be moved by various other motives: one can, as Blum suggests, be seeking out the weaknesses of the other in order to use them to harm her (Blum 1994: 311); or one may be moved by one's desire to find approval in the other's face; or by economic interest to seek out possible building sites in a natural landscape, etc. Attention seeks first of all to perceive justly and selflessly.

2 Attention as a Loving Gaze

Murdoch calls the general motivation behind attention 'love', and describes attention as a 'loving gaze'. The inclusion of love in attention has given rise to some difficulties, so I shall consider it at some length. The idea of 'loving gaze' has been explored, among others, by Nancy Snow (2005) and Christine Swanton (2003). Both Snow and Swanton attempt to address the worry that a loving gaze may prevent the subject from seeing the negative aspects of the object of attention, or may cause the subject to perceive its positive features as more salient than the negative ones without justification. This worry arises partly because of the psychology and phenomenology of love, where the lover can overlook the flaws of the beloved, as is frequently observed in the early stages of romantic relationships or in parents' assessment of their children (a much-studied phenomenon in empirical psychology under the name of 'love is blind bias').¹²⁰ Yet if an attentive gaze is, as in Murdoch's definition, also just and truthful, it must reveal the object as it truly is, including its flaws. So for instance, as many have noted, the notion of attention should make room for M (in the famous M and D example, in SG 17-8)

¹²⁰ See Swami et al. (2009).

to perceive D as juvenile and vulgar, if that were how she really was.¹²¹ The fact that M's revised view of D is more positive can mislead into thinking that a loving gaze will always yield a positive view, but that is never implied by Murdoch. In the example, in fact, we are told that 'when M is just and loving she sees D as she really is' (SG 37).¹²²

Like attention, love is partly used by Murdoch as a specialised concept, following Weil; this means that the concept of love does not entirely match its ordinary and psychological use. As with attention, in certain contexts, Murdoch uses 'love' normatively. This also explains why the requirement to love in Murdoch is not – like the requirement to attend – limited to other people, but rather can encompass in principle anything. Characterising the loving gaze in the context of attention involves being able to combine the clarity and realism that attention involves, which is not ordinarily attributed to love, with the positive contribution that love makes. In contrast to this, Sabina Lovibond sees a dichotomy between accurate perception and loving vision when considering M's case:

Either D really is faultless, in which case M's new, wholly positive or 'loving', picture is the outcome of accurate perception in a sense that would be accepted by anyone who thinks particular moral properties can be accurately ascribed to individuals; or alternatively – and this I believe is closer to the spirit of Murdoch's discussion – we are meant to credit M's new picture with an 'accuracy' of a special, non-empirical kind, anticipating Murdoch's later self-identification as a 'Christian fellow-traveller'. (Lovibond 2011: 26)

Much hinges here on the understanding of 'accuracy'. As Murdoch writes, 'What M is *ex hypothesi* attempting to do is not just to see D accurately but to see her justly or lovingly ... "love" and "justice" ... introduce ... the idea of progress' (SG 23). While a loving gaze does not yield 'accurate' perception, if accurate means scientifically empirical and thus impersonal, it does yield a kind of perception that

¹²¹ Noted by Swanton (2003: 113), Snow (2005: 488), Altorf (2008: 70), and Lovibond (2011: 25-6).

¹²² This passage is referred to by Robjant (2011b: 1022) against Altorf's statement, quoted by Lovibond, that 'Murdoch does not explain whether D is *really* "vulgar" or "refreshingly simple"' (Altorf 2008: 70, quoted in Lovibond 2011: 26). Lovibond herself only partly endorses Altorf's statement, admitting that Murdoch gives reasons to believe that M's redescription of D is the correct one (see Lovibond 2011: 26, fn. 154). It is true that Murdoch does not provide, at first and separately, a description of D from an impersonal 'God's eye' perspective. But that is hardly surprising, given her observations, in the same pages, about the idiosyncratic character of perception, the partly private nature of concepts and how much learning the right descriptions for things depends on contexts (for ex SG 29, 32-33). On this view, a 'God's eye view' description of D would hardly make sense, as if someone could provide the standard to which M's thoughts should conform. Much of Murdoch's message is precisely that this is not possible, and that striving for the right description is a partly individual task which is by its nature constantly perfectible (SG 23).

is true to the reality it observes, and does not clash with the idea ‘that particular moral properties can be accurately ascribed to individuals’ (Lovibond 2011: 26). The perception yielded by the loving gaze is also empirically correct, if we follow Murdoch in broadening the scope of empiricism to include ordinary imaginative perception; it is, in fact, truer, because in Murdoch’s theory impersonal scientific apprehension, especially when it comes to complicated human realities, is overly narrow and partial. As I shall argue, a loving gaze, far from distorting its object, is precisely the means by which the most truthful and correct perception is achieved. To explain this claim, I shall start by clarifying the idea of love inherent in attention, as Murdoch conceives of it, under the influence of Simone Weil and Plato.

2.1 *Eros* as Desiring Energy

In both Murdoch and Weil, it often appears that the concepts of love and attention are very similar, to the point of identification. For Murdoch, love and attention share not only the central role in morality, but also the specific way in which they are central: the fact that, in their proper manifestations, they are directed toward reality and make it available to the subject (Weil: ‘love needs reality’, GG 65). They both, moreover, involve a desire for the Good, which is what makes for their truth-seeking nature. Murdoch defines love in terms very similar to attention, as ‘the faculty which is supposed to relate us to what is real and thus bring us to what is good’ (SG 66). Both love and attention are also connected with a rejection of egoistic thoughts and thus of fantasy, corresponding to the effort to be just to what one is presented with, which means to really ‘see’ it:

It is in the capacity to love, that is to *see*, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists ... what counteracts the system is attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love. (SG 66-7)

This passage shows the ambivalence in Murdoch about the relation of love and attention: attention ‘consisting of’ love is not the same as attention ‘inspired by’ love. While the similarities between love and attention can point to an identification of the two, the introduction of attention in SG in terms of a ‘loving gaze’ suggests that love is an element of attention, rather than another name for it. In SG attention appears as a way of looking at things *qualified* by love. So attention appears as a way of approaching the world moved by, or drawing on, love, where love is also a normative concept. Love then provides *something* to attention without which it could not be the central moral concept that Murdoch wants.

To understand what that something is we need to look more closely at Murdoch's concept of love. Her understanding of love has its roots in Plato's *eros*. Murdoch believes that the *intended* aim of all human action is the Good. This idea is central to Murdoch's theory of love, desire and motivation, and she inherits it from Plato, but also from Weil's reading of Plato, who takes from the *Republic* and the *Symposium* the idea that 'the good is what every soul seeks and why it acts' (*Republic* 505e in SN 102), and Murdoch similarly stresses that 'Good is not a god, but an Idea which inspires love. Good is what all men love and wish to possess for ever (*Symposium* 206a)' (MGM 343).¹²³ For both Weil and Murdoch, love is a form of desire and a constitutive element of attention: Murdoch's loving gaze echoes Weil's idea that attention can be directed only by desire (WG 71), where the nature of 'desire' is also idiosyncratic, as we shall see.

On this understanding, far from its ordinary meaning, love is not primarily a positive sentiment for a particular person or object, although it can be that too, but something more akin to energy or motivation, which can be negative as well as positive. Such energy can also address itself to anything, people being an object among many: as in the story told by Diotima in the *Symposium*, the lover can pass through various objects of love, people, arts, intellectual disciplines, to reach the true object of love, the Form of the Good. Drawing from this idea, Murdoch sees *eros* as a 'fundamental life-force' that drives human beings in all their actions and provides motivation. She compares *eros* to Freud's *libido*, the energy coming from the sexual drive, which informs other, non-sexual activities.

If love is understood as *eros* or energy, a first answer can be offered to the question of the contribution of love to attention: love is a motivating factor behind attention, it is 'tension, exertion, zeal' (MGM 343, with reference to *Symposium* 206B). It is the (erotic) desire that, as Bowden observes (1998: 65), inspires ethical attention.

2.2 Love as a Normative Concept

Because *eros* is the ambiguous 'demon' or force that motivates human beings, it is very different from the Good it aims at, as Murdoch stresses: 'Good is the magnetic centre *towards which* love naturally moves' (SG 102, emphasis added). While 'the

¹²³ Cf. also: 'For human beings, there is no other object of love if not the good' (*Symposium* 205d, 206a in Weil 1957: 130).

goal, the end, the absolute, is transcendent, impersonal, pure’, ‘the *energy* is something more mixed and personal, godlike yet not divine, capable of corruption’ (MGM 343). Because what everyone desires is what one apprehends as Good, and because one can be much mistaken about what things are good, love as desire for the Good can be both a positive and a negative kind of desire.¹²⁴ In Murdoch’s words, although ‘what is desired is desired as, genuinely, good’, it is also the case that ‘many desires reach only distorted shadows of goodness’ (MGM 343). Love does not necessarily lead to moral improvement. Therefore, the concept of love needs to be further qualified, if it is to be an element of attention. Murdoch indicates the kind of qualification required, in the concluding pages of SG, where she highlights the centrality of love in morality:

Love is the general name of the quality of attachment and capable of infinite degradation and it is the source of our greatest errors; but when it is even partially refined it is the energy and passion of the soul in its search for the Good, the force that joins us to Good and joins us to the world through Good. Its existence is the unmistakable sign that we are spiritual creatures, attracted by excellence and made for the Good. It is a reflection of the warmth and light of the sun. (SG 103)

What is part of attention, then, is a ‘purified’ sort of love, like the love that reaches the higher stages of the ascent in the *Symposium*, which involves the purification of the desire that constitutes it.¹²⁵ The idea of love that is required for attention is thus not descriptive but normative.¹²⁶ What is still unclear is how love becomes pure, and how pure love achieves the suggested aim of ‘joining us to the world through the Good’ – in other words, how love can help with achieving correct perception, which is the question asked at the start of this section.

Murdoch suggests what appear as two distinct ways to purify love: i) one way is to love, even imperfectly, truly good things, because ‘when true good is loved ... the quality of the love is automatically refined’ (SG 102); ii) the other way is to try, as she puts it, ‘perfectly’ to love, even when the object itself is not truly good: ‘and when we try perfectly to love what is imperfect our love goes to its

¹²⁴ Murdoch is aware of the manifold manifestations of love, and its destructive potential, particularly evident in love for people: ‘human love, the love of persons for other persons, is sui generis, and among our natural faculties and impulses the one which is potentially nearest to the highest divine attributes ... though in practice often remote from them’ (MGM 346). See also MGM 17.

¹²⁵ It may be more accurate to talk of ‘purer love’, since in Murdoch’s perfectionistic framework perfectly purified love, like perfect attention and perfect knowledge of any object, is not achievable. The goal is ever receding. So by ‘pure love’, I mean the ideal to which love should tend, as well as the improved love that is achieved after purification of desire.

¹²⁶ ‘Here we use the word love as a normative term’ (MGM 345).

object *via* the Good to be thus purified and made unselfish and just' (SG 103). Let us look at each way in turn.

2.2.1 Love of Good Things

The first way of purifying love is more familiar, and found in the *Symposium*, where Diotima defines love as 'desire for the everlasting possession of the Good' (206b). The lover is improved by loving objects which manifest goodness in various degrees; the better the object, the more the lover will be improved by loving them. This is in accordance with Murdoch's idea that what we desire and thus what occupies our minds becomes part of the fabric of our consciousness: spending time concocting revenge plans or browsing celebrity magazines will build up a different quality of consciousness from occupying oneself with T.S. Eliot's verse, or taking a stroll to contemplate nature in the countryside.

Plato depicts improvement as an ascent toward the form of the Good via various things that embody goodness in increasing degree. Carnal love is the lowest, followed by love of other souls, then love of poetry, political institutions, science, and philosophy. Simone Weil explains this progression with her theory of desire, which chimes with Murdoch's observations, the latter being however less fully spelled out. For Weil, desire is a paradoxical force, unlimited in principle but limited in its application (NB 100): desire, as we saw, is always desire for the absolute (for Weil God, for Murdoch and Plato the Good), but as finite beings in a finite world, we attach our desires to finite things. These cannot, however, satisfy the unlimited nature of desire, which as a result turns into a possessive and negative force. The Good is both the only proper object of desire and the only proper object of possession, where possessing Good means *being* good. With objects in the world, the desire to possess is both illusory and destructive, because it goes against their reality: objects of desire are ultimately independent of our will.¹²⁷ This issues in dissatisfaction which, for Weil, coincides with the degrading possessiveness of worldly desire, and at the same time leads us to seek new objects.

Since desire is natural to human beings, what is required is not an uprooting of desire, but a purification of its possessive illusory element. Because the Good itself is not an object of perception, and because apprehension of the Good is achieved through a progressively refined perception of goodness in worldly objects,

¹²⁷ This is one of many instances in which Weil's thought displays its Stoic influence.

the purification of desire must take place through attachment to objects which defeat possession and inspire pure love. Beautiful objects appear as the best candidates, because they inspire detached contemplation and the desire for them to be what they are. Good objects and good people are also manifestations of the Good, but they are less likely to defeat possessiveness. By defeating possessiveness, beauty encourages the pure love which constitutes attention. As Murdoch writes:

The beautiful in nature (and we would wish to add in art) demands and rewards attention to something grasped as entirely external and indifferent to the greedy ego. We cannot acquire and assimilate the beautiful. (FS 417)¹²⁸

Similarly Weil, in a beautiful and clarifying passage:

Beauty attracts the attention and yet does nothing to sustain it. Beauty always promises, but never gives anything. There is nothing to be desired, because the one thing we want is that it should not change ... if one does not seek means to evade the exquisite anguish it inflicts, then desire is gradually transformed into love and one begins to acquire the faculty of pure and disinterested attention. (HP 28-9)

So one way to purify desire, and be inspired by the love that motivates attention, is to direct one's desires to good objects, beautiful ones in particular.

2.2.2 Love of the Good

However, while beautiful objects attract attention and defeat possession more than others, they do not guarantee that pure love and attention will be achieved. Weil indicates that the lover needs to be active, by sustaining the pain of the impossible possession: if such truth is acknowledged, not only intellectually but in every way, then the possessive desire, deprived of possession, will be held in suspension, and become desire proper, which for Weil is 'desire without an object ... desire without wish.' (N 421) Such open, suspended desire can only have as its object something equally infinite. That is, as Murdoch and Weil write, God / the Good, in which alone apprehension and desire coincide with possession.¹²⁹

Beautiful and good objects help in getting closer to the Good by defeating desire and thus revealing the Good as the true object of love and desire. They also, as Murdoch argues with the 'degree of perfection' argument, act as intimations of perfection, thus improving one's grasp of the Good. Love of good objects, therefore, is not the end point of love, but a way to purify love's desire and improve

¹²⁸ Here the influence of Kant on Murdoch's idea of beauty is evident.

¹²⁹ Weil: 'It is with respect to false goods that desire and possession are different; with respect to the true good, there is no difference' (1970: 157) and Murdoch, referring to Moore about the Good with approval: 'to be able to see it as in some sense to have it' (SG 3).

apprehension of the Good. Love of the Good, too, is not the end point of the moral pilgrim's quest, because the Good by itself cannot be an object of perception. What loving the Good in a purified way means, therefore, is to love any object in the world in a way that is *inspired* by the Good, i.e. 'to love *via* the Good' – Murdoch's second way, which now appears as issuing directly from the first.

Loving purely or *via* the Good consists in loving unselfishly, unpossessively, and justly, but also in being willing and prepared to discover value in the object, because the object is seen in the light of the Good. In the same way as the pilgrim in Plato's myth returns to the cave and sees more clearly the objects that she once saw dimly, so 'our love goes to its object *via* the Good to be thus purified and made unselfish and just' (SG 103). In other words, to love the Good, and the world *via* the Good, signifies being in a state of mind inspired by one's best grasp of the ideal, or having an attitude disposed in such a way, resisting possessive and de-realising temptations.

It is important that love thus understood can fasten itself to any object, not only good or beautiful ones. Being inspired by the Good sets no limit on the worldly object of love, because the love itself, moved by the purified desire of the lover, is good love – it is, therefore, the love that is required for attention. Such love can *attend* to its object, purified of the claims of the ego that result in distortion and possession.¹³⁰ When it comes to other people, this involves respect for their separate reality and autonomy, fundamental in both Weil and Murdoch.¹³¹ Love should be able to take anything as its object, moreover, because the possibility to try 'perfectly to love what is imperfect' (SG 103) is central to attention. As the ability to see the world justly, attention needs to be able to take anything as its object, because it is a faculty that must be exercised in any situation. To see a situation justly often involves seeing what is deeply imperfect in it.

The requirement to see justly whatever is salient, together with the importance of seeing the object in its wholeness, without picking out its positive

¹³⁰ This is one way in which Murdoch can explain what is known as the 'confirmation bias', the tendency to see the beloved differently (better) from what they really are in order to maintain one's positive self-image, for instance as someone who can choose a partner well (cf. Tavis and Aronson 2007: Chapter 6).

¹³¹ Murdoch explicitly nods in Kant's direction here, although for Kant love and respect are very different. Velleman (1999), however, has tried to reconcile Kant's idea of respect with Murdoch's notion of love as part of attention, but at the cost of making Murdochian love into an impersonal kind of emotion.

features, means that love, as part of attention, cannot be construed as being motivated only by an ‘appraisal’ of value in the object.¹³² The purified loving gaze is neither partial (imperfect objects are not loved in part, insofar as they possess some good, but in their entirety) nor instrumental (the object of love is not loved because it can benefit the lover). Rather, the love in attention is entirely gratuitous.¹³³

2.3 Love as Clear Vision

We are now in a better position to answer the question: what does love contribute to attention? The discussion of purified love in Weil and Murdoch has highlighted two central features: its selfless and unpossessive quality, combined with a desire to be just to its object and to see the good in it. Rather than an appraisal, this kind of love is ‘creative’, because seeing things as they are requires, by Murdoch’s lights, the exercise of the imagination as well as the active removal of obstacles to vision.¹³⁴

The discussion of love has also provided an answer to the initial question: how can a loving gaze be also accurate? First, the loving gaze of attention is free from the possessive attachment and involvement of the ego, which is the primary element of distortion in unpurified love. Second, the ability of the loving gaze to reveal goodness in the object does not consist in a projection: what is revealed must be there in the object, waiting to be discovered. That is also why this concept of love is also not ‘bestowal’ of value on the object.¹³⁵ Thus Snow (2001) is correct in claiming that a loving gaze does not require us to downplay the bad features of the object, requiring instead an ‘openness to personality conceived of as a complex intermixture of flexible, dynamic traits and tendencies’ (Snow 2001: 495). But the loving gaze also requires the imagination to play an active role in allowing for a charitable vision of the object of attention:¹³⁶ when attending to other people, a

¹³² The appraisal view of love is defended, among others, by Velleman (1999) and Kolodny (2003).

¹³³ Because of this, as Milligan has remarked (2014: 2), Murdoch’s idea of love lacks the intentionality that is typical of most accounts of love in analytic philosophy.

¹³⁴ ‘At its highest point, love is the determination to create the being which it has taken for its object’ (Paul Valéry, quoted in MGM 506). Cf. Ch.3§2.5 on this point.

¹³⁵ According to the bestowal view, love is an attitude which confers value to the beloved even when value is not there. As Singer (1991: 273) writes, ‘love ... confers importance no matter *what* the object is worth’.

¹³⁶ Although Murdoch is mostly inspired by love as *eros* rather than *agape*, her concept of love also contains elements of the latter: in particular, if *agape* or charity is understood in the terms set by Aquinas, as ‘the virtue whereby we love God for his own sake ... an appetitive state whereby our

loving gaze can imagine what it is like for the other, suggest possible interpretations of their behaviour which can make it understandable or justifiable, look for possible reasons for certain actions (a difficult childhood, say), and it is maximally receptive to what is good in the other, looking for value that may otherwise be missed. None of these activities are projections or falsifications: the positive interpretations of the other need to be possible, based on the evidence available.¹³⁷ As Troy Jollimore writes, ‘the lover is especially determined to *find* value in the beloved and to appreciate the values that are there’ (Jollimore 2011: 68). The loving attitude is receptive to value, but love does not consist merely in an appraisal of value, because love needs to be in place already for the value in the object to be *fully* appreciated.¹³⁸

It is true that the kind of epistemic attitude just described is more likely to be found among people bound by a tie of love in the ordinary sense, but only in cases when the love is at least partially ‘pure’, i.e. just and selfless. Keller (2004) considers this special loving receptivity towards people we love an epistemic fault. But, as Jollimore (2011) argues, the main reason for taking such a view is the assumption that the default state in which we make judgments about what we are indifferent to is epistemically ideal. Whereas, in the appreciation of complex objects such as human beings and human situations, the loving gaze may not only not be distorting, but it can be epistemically optimal, because by being maximally open and receptive it reveals features that may otherwise remain hidden. Should we not then, Jollimore asks, rather apply the loving way of looking – *ideally* – to everyone and everything? That seems just what Murdoch is suggesting with the idea of attention as a loving gaze. Therefore, the love which constitutes attention, providing motivation in the form of love of the Good, is not only compatible with

appetites are uniformly ordered to God’ (STIIaIIae 23.3), a love of God which at the same time is love of our neighbour (‘we cannot love God unless we also love our neighbour’, STIIaIIae 25.1 and 44.7), we can clearly see the similarities with Murdoch’s idea of love directed to the Good and at the same time to the world.

¹³⁷ In the case of M and D, as noted at the start, it is possible to imagine a different story where D is really vulgar, noisy, etc. Far from requiring to ignore these features, a loving gaze needs to be sensitive to them too: noticing them would make it possible, for example, for M to gently make D aware of behaviours that she may be able alter and which may alienate other people to her. Furthermore, as Sabina Lovibond points out (2011: 26) it would generally be morally irresponsible to ignore vices or evil, so a gaze moved by desire for the good cannot be meant to do that.

¹³⁸ As noted above, it is possible to recognise value and especially salience in some instances without having a loving gaze. The reason is that it is unlikely that someone’s perception is completely clouded by self-concern; likewise, a loving gaze comes in degrees, and while there is an ideal to be aimed at, in practise there are degrees of love and correspondent degrees of just vision.

accurate vision of its object, but it contributes positively to a better appreciation of it.

3 The Objects of Attention

3.1 Good or World?

Attention has been described as the moral faculty that enables just, truthful and loving perception of reality. This description implies that the proper object of attention is the world (cf. SG 67, MGM 218, 339). Why, then, does Murdoch also claim that attention needs to be directed to the Good itself? (SG 55) Although Murdoch talks of attention to the Good, she also raises the question: ‘can good itself be an object of attention?’ (SG 68), and answers: ‘while it seems proper to represent the Good as a centre or focus of attention, yet it cannot quite be thought of as a “visible” one in that it cannot be experienced or represented or defined’ (SG 70). This problem can be addressed by considering the discussion of love and its objects.

While Good is not an object of perception, it is intimated or suggested as a standard of perfection by all good things. That is how, as we have seen, love as desire for the Good can approximate itself to its true object by ascending through various goods in the world. Having purified itself and achieved a better grasp of the Good, love can be the sort of force that animates attention. Then, purified love can inform attention to any object in the world. Against this background, we can understand how attention works in relation to the Good: the attentive person needs to refine her understanding of the Good, moved by love or *eros* and by contemplating various good objects, but the purpose of attention is to reveal reality as it is. Its object needs to be the world. However, having love as a constitutive element, attention is constantly moved in its apprehension of the world by desire for the Good: attention is directed at reality, but reality is observed through compassion, justice, and the idea of perfection or the Good.

My suggestion, then, is that we explain the ambiguity between the Good and the world as objects of attention by modifying Murdoch’s formulation about the requirement to attend to the Good thus: the proper object of attention is reality; but attention to reality is informed by desire for the Good, given by love. Attention

can be understood as a gaze directed to reality, but *through*, or via, the Good.¹³⁹ This solution chimes with several of Murdoch's remarks, where she states that 'the direction of attention is ... towards the great surprising variety of the world, and the ability so to direct attention is love' (SG 66), or her definition of (moral) freedom as 'that which in us attends to the real and is attracted by the good' (SG 75). In its engagement with reality, which is complex and contingent, together with its desire for the Good, single and perfect, attention is the link between the two aspects of the moral life, and indeed of human life in general, mentioned at the start of the discussion of Murdoch's metaphysics (Ch.1§1): unity and particularity/multiplicity, order and chaos, etc. Attention shapes the good consciousness by combining the *intuition* of unity and desire for perfection with a grasp of the complexity of the world. Like Plato's Demiurge in the *Timaeus*, the attentive person must keep her eyes on reality and *at the same time* on the Good (MGM 107), but in two different ways. Attention sees particulars on the background provided by the intuition of the Good, where loving the Good and attending to an individual are part of the same activity.¹⁴⁰

3.2 Objects within the World

Even if attention has the world as its object, the scope of attention remains very broad. Given the inherent limitations in our ability to attend, in most cases it is necessary to select some objects at the expense of others. Therefore, the question that remains to be asked is whether there are objects within the world that merit attention, and if so, whether there are criteria to identify them. The question can be divided between whether some objects are legitimate objects of attention and others

¹³⁹ As Chappell (2014) notes, to conclude that 'we only get a clear grip on what talk about "the Good" might mean when we are considering how "the Good" might be applied to contemplating specific cases' may require us to give up 'the last vestige of what seems to be Plato's idea, in the *Republic*, that the contemplation of the Good itself, all on its own, is somehow the acme and the goal of contemplation' (2014, p. 319). However, as Chappell suggests, this conclusion can, in fact, be compatible with Plato's own ideas: 'when we remember the famous line about the philosopher's redescent from Republic 520c2 – καταβατέον οὖν – perhaps we will conclude that this conjunction of necessary separation and necessary involvement is what Plato himself really had in mind anyway' (Chappell 2014, p. 319) What seems clear is that, in Murdoch's reading, Plato does not wish to disconnect the Good from the world.

¹⁴⁰ In a beautiful piece, Janet Soskice (1992) has argued for ordinary life as proper object of attention in the context of spiritual life: against Augustine's model, whereby the world is to be 'used, not enjoyed' (1992: 64) as a passing place on the path to a more fulfilling one, Soskice argues that our everyday experience as physical beings in a transient world – her example is maternity – can provide objects of attention that lead us out of ourselves and give us as true a sense of spirituality as the monastic, contemplative life.

are not, and whether among legitimate objects of attention some take precedence over others.

If the task of attention is to reveal reality, including moral reality, then, as we have seen, it would be contradictory to claim that we should as a rule ignore certain objects, or not attend to them. Whatever is part of reality has in principle a claim to attention. So the real question to be answered is the latter: are there objects that deserve attention more than others? Or: can we have criteria to determine the salience of particular objects for attention?¹⁴¹

One possible answer is ‘no’, because attention is valuable in its own right, so being attentive, no matter what the object, is itself a good. Chappell (2014) remarks that contemplation (by which he means, I take it, something very similar to attention) can be, as long as it is true contemplation, directed at ‘absolutely anything’. For it to be true contemplation, or attention, it needs to be recognition of something beyond oneself (Murdoch’s ‘authority of reality’), animated by justice and compassion, which results in unselfing and self-discipline. Is it possible that any object can serve this purpose, even ‘hard-core pornography, or Nazi memorabilia, or excrement, or celebrity magazines?’ (Chappell 2014: 305). Chappell responds affirmatively. Although it is in principle possible to properly attend, with a just and loving gaze, to such things, it is in practice rather unlikely; it is unusual, say, for someone to engage with hard core pornography or celebrity magazines with the intention of achieving a clear eyed comprehension of another reality. One reason is that, as opposed to art and nature, Murdoch’s favourite examples, these objects tend to encourage self-gratifying purposes, and tend to be approached with such aims in mind.

Even allowing for the possibility that any object is a legitimate object of attention, and even if, therefore, attending to any object is a valuable activity, the value of attention is not exhausted by being an exercise of selfless contemplation. As Murdoch writes, there is tending to one’s soul and there is helping one’s neighbour, and ‘one must no doubt do both, and is likely to be tending soul if helping neighbour and vice versa’ (MGM 360): attention has value, not only because it improves our consciousness, but also because it allows us to see the world clearly, and that includes the various modulations of salience. Therefore, even if

¹⁴¹ In the next chapter I address the question of how not only salience, but also specific moral properties, are made available to the subject.

attention is always good, it also requires attending to some things rather than others, because some things merit attention more than others. Chappell continues:

‘Joining the world as it really is’ necessarily involves recognizing that, even if everything is interesting, still it is part of the way the world ‘really is’ that some things are more important, and so more worthy of contemplation, than others. Under this heading Murdoch notes three things, or kinds of thing, in particular. The first is other people; the second is beauty; the third is what she calls ‘the Good’. (Chappell 2004: 309)

Should the recommendation to attend to other people, beauty and the Good be followed? As for the Good, I have suggested that, in itself, the Good is more helpfully considered as an animating or inspiring principle, rather than a direct object of attention. What about the embodied Good, or good things? Murdoch writes:

There are good modes of attention and good objects of attention. ‘Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things be of good report, if there be any virtue, if there be any praise, think on these things’ (St. Paul, Philippians, 4.8.) ... These ‘things’ which are just and good assist our attention when we try to make just and compassionate judgments of others or to judge and correct ourselves. (MGM 301)

Good things are indeed good objects of attention, and can be more appropriate than others, because they help one’s moral development, in two ways: on the one hand, they provide inspiration by pointing to a standard for our own moral improvement; on the other (like beauty), they themselves encourage (‘assist’) or create attention, by defeating possessiveness, as we saw in relation to love. However, good things can be recommended as an object of attention above other objects only when all other things are equal, i.e. when other objects don’t have a greater claim on our attention. Nor can attention be limited to good things: even if we consider good things as worthy of attention because of their inherent value, as we saw above, attention needs to encompass more than goodness, because clear perception of reality includes things that are not good. Difficulties and suffering and all sorts of things that have little goodness in them are in many cases what merit attention most urgently.¹⁴² It is true that one needs to have learnt, and continue to learn, to distinguish what is good from what is not and in what degree, through a constant and renewed sense of what the Good involves. But what the Good does is to help to apprehend clearly a multifarious reality. The same considerations apply to the

¹⁴² Cf. MGM 73. In Weil attention to what is not good, in particular attention to suffering, is extremely important: cf. ‘The Love of God and Affliction’ in WG.

other candidate, beauty, which, although it trains consciousness, is even less important than good things:

Art, though it demands moral effort and teaches quiet attention (as any serious study can do) is a kind of treat ... we have to make moral choices, we do not have to enjoy great art and doubtless many good people never do. But surely great art points in the direction of the good. (FS 453-4)

To preserve the realism of attention, we must conclude that what merits or requires attention is not what is itself valuable, but what is most salient. Beauty and goodness may not be always the most salient element of a situation. Let us explore other possibilities, including other people, the last candidate that Chappell (2014) suggests, with an ordinary situation as example:

I am walking down the avenue from university to home, wearing cheap leather trainers. It is a beautiful autumn day and the leaves on the trees are various shades of red and brown. I am absorbed by a philosophical problem which has been exercising me for the past few weeks. At the same time, a close old relative, many miles away, is unwell. In this situation, my attention is focused on the philosophical problem to the exclusion, to a great extent, of almost everything else. Let us also assume that I am attending to the problem with a desire to see its aspects justly and trying to exclude self-directed influences, like my eagerness to find a solution quickly or my fear of not being able to. Is this a case of 'morally good attention', or does my selection of the object of attention present a problem? Should I be attending, for example, to the colourful trees around me, because they are present, thus attempting to 'be in the moment'? Or should I think about my relative, because I care about her, and because thinking about her may prompt me to telephone her, which would make her happy? Or should I worry, if I have not yet done so, about the shoes I am wearing, because they are the result of suffering and exploitation, something that by buying them I participate in perpetrating?

One possibility that Murdoch suggests is that attention should be devoted to what is there, being a form of 'presence'.

Should we not endeavour to see and attend to what surrounds and concerns us, because it is there and is interesting, beautiful, strange, worth experiencing, and because it demands (and needs) our attention, rather than living in a vague haze of private anxiety and fantasy? (MGM 218)

A Chapter in MGM opens with a lyrical passage by Pater, exalting the joy and value of being fully present and of living in a sort of 'perpetual ecstasy', which, although problematic because potentially narcissistic, suggests something that Murdoch

believes philosophy has unduly neglected: the importance of ‘presence and encounter’ (MGM 112): ‘living in the present: I really see the face of my friend, the playing dog, Piero's picture’ (MGM 301).

But, as Murdoch recognises, we are creatures who live in time, and the things we do are shaped by the past and will have consequences in the future, to which we also need to attend. Attention to what is present is challenged by the importance and in some cases necessity to attend to what is temporally and spatially not present: the relative many miles away who can be cheered up by a phone call, or the animals and labourers who are harmed by my purchasing habits. Moreover, the distinction between presence and absence is problematised by the difficulty of assigning to one or the other category objects like philosophical problems, or any more abstract concern which has no physical and temporal location.

While what is present cannot, for these reasons, have exclusive claim on attention, it seems reasonable to suggest that presence provides at least a *prima facie* reason to attend to something rather than something else. ‘Presence and encounter’ are where thoughts about other things in time first develop. The present is what forms the memories or ideas that we go back to in thought, and without being present none of them would be created. What is present, moreover, is also what is normally best able to draw us out of ourselves, to make immediate and pressing demands on us, in a way that thought alone, being what relates us to other times, does not. So the autumnal trees on my way have a special claim on my attention. However, yet again, not an exclusive one, nor one that cannot be overridden by other claims.

Then, there is ‘other people’, the first candidate for being an especially apt object of contemplation as mentioned by Chappell (2014) in the quote above. It is a fact that Murdoch often returns to the importance of other people, and places the moral importance of people above art (FS 417), yet she does not claim that other people are always the most salient object of attention. Nor does Murdoch offer reasons for placing other people at the centre of attention, apart from the unargued-for but apparently obvious idea that other people just do matter, and often matter more than anything else. However, this intuition cannot be discarded, and it may be that the best object of attention in the example is the ill relation, just because, for most of us, other people do matter above anything else. Nevertheless, these

considerations do not make other people the only object of attention, so it is still possible that other objects may be, in different contexts, more salient.

One last suggestion for identifying what merits attention is to consider what constitutes ‘what demands (and needs) our attention’ (MGM 218). Something that ‘needs’ attention may be something that we can influence, help, or change. So ‘what surrounds and concerns us’ (MGM 218) can refer to something that one can be considered responsible for, or less demandingly something that one is in a position to affect: the animals in the choice of shoes in the example, the students in the seminar room, the friend who may need our company— all the individuals and realities that depend on us and our choices in some way.

That seems like a reasonable suggestion, but it is again not clear that it can exhaust the scope of salient objects of attention: are we always required to attend only to what we can be responsible for, to what we can help or hinder? A view of morality which requires one only to attend to what one is causally linked to appears not only overly demanding, but also to exclude much of what is experienced as making life valuable and worthwhile: the contemplation of nature and the red leaves on the pavement, but also of art, and of the little pointless but interesting details of one’s surroundings and indeed, abstract or philosophical problems. These things can *also* be something we are responsible for, and attending to them may bring us to act in certain ways, but attending to them seems worthwhile even when that is not the case.

In conclusion, it seems that, although presence and responsibility and goodness and humanity are all *prima facie* elements of what has a claim on our attention, there are no reasons to exclude one in favour of the other, nor to prioritise one of those elements over others in advance of the situation in which a choice needs to be made. The above elements may be the more salient ones in a situation *ceteris paribus*, but that cannot be determined in advance. Compatibly with Murdoch’s insistence that morality is to be understood in individual contexts, the relative salience of objects of attention cannot be spelled out beforehand by providing universal criteria. This also helps to explain why Murdoch herself does not provide any. The concept of attention as moral perception includes the particularity that only reveals itself in the moment of perception. Moreover, the situation I sketched is too vague to provide an indication, leaving open, for instance, what the problem I am thinking of is, its role in my life, when I heard of my

relative's illness and whether I had called her before, etc. A skilled novelist might have provided a description where relative salience is manifest, but in that case, the criteria would have become unnecessary, because the salience would have been there to see, and specific to that situation.

If different claims and considerations operate at different times, then the ability to discern their relative role and salience is what is required. Attention can fulfil this role, being a composite of various faculties and attitudes which make possible clear and just perception, and that includes perception of salience. Instead of criteria for determining the proper objects of attention, therefore, attention itself can reveal salience, in the particular context and not beforehand. This is possible if we consider that attention is not only the standard 'focused' attention that can be directed at individual objects, as discussed in this section, but it also operates at the level of 'open', waiting and receptive perception (as we saw in Ch.3§2.3). Attention, in its open aspect, is able to be held in suspension and scan a situation without fixing on anything in particular, and then perceive the salient components on which focused attention should fasten itself.¹⁴³

Moral attention involves both open receptivity as well as focus on a particular object. In its open aspect, it is the selfless, open and receptive gaze that discloses the relative salience of particular objects, and is able to 'see' which objects demand focused attention, and which are less relevant. In this sense, attention presents itself as an attitude, a way of looking at the world independent of the object – the closest approximation to the 'objectless' and unattainable attention to the Good. Open attention may signal, on my walk home, that at that a particular moment it is appropriate for me to try to solve my philosophical problem, and perhaps ignore the beauty of nature, and not think of other people – but whether this particular allocation of attention is correct cannot be claimed in abstraction from the particular situation.

4 Attention and the Will

The discussion about the proper objects of attention leaves it unspecified in what way 'focused' attention is directed to specific object, after 'open' attention has

¹⁴³ Incorporating this aspect of attention may address Nussbaum's (1990a) thought that attention is inherently flawed, because it is limited to some objects, to the exclusion of others. The claim is valid as far as focused attention is concerned, but not about attention in general.

revealed the relative salience. For instance, attention allocation can be an automatic process, or an active choice directed by the will. In this section I consider the role of the will in attention. Doing so will not only provide a better understanding of what is required of the attentive subject, but it will also help to clarify how the subject can be held responsible for attending. As we saw in §1 above, one of the features of attention as a moral concept is that one can be praised and blamed for it. Thus we come to what is the second requirement for attention set out by Blum (2012), its being deliberate (§1.1). The question I shall explore is to what extent attention is the effect of a willed exertion, and if it is not, whether it can still be something for which the subject is responsible: if the moral life depends to a large extent on whether we attend and what we attend to, or if attention is both a sign and a result of virtue, then it is important to know how that can be achieved and to what extent it is under the subject's conscious control.

It is tempting to consider attention as a direct result of the exercise of the will, because that yields an easy way to hold the subject accountable for her exercise of attention, or lack thereof. Murdoch herself often talks about attention as something that requires will, describing it as 'moral *effort*' and 'moral discipline' (SG 38), and in some passages she explicitly urges an exercise of the will in directing our mental lives: 'as moral agents we have to try to see justly, to overcome prejudice, to avoid temptation, to control and curb imagination, to direct reflection' and we can do so because we have 'continual slight control over the direction and focus of (our) vision' (SG 40), where 'passing moments have a positive controllable content' (MGM 260). In understanding or in the creative process, for example, attention is exercised when the effort to understand, perceive, or truthfully create, needs to be pressed a little harder, staying in the difficult world-grasping present without letting it pass 'in vagueness and lassitude': 'this', Murdoch writes, 'is a place for the notion of an effort of will' (MGM 179-80). On this understanding, the good person is the one who chooses or wills to attend, and wills to attend to the right things. Being able to will attention means that clear vision, or lack thereof, is something that is up to us, so something we can be praised or blamed for:

And if any of our important beliefs are and have to be products of a willed attention, then realism about the world is seen to require qualities of character (virtues) other than a professedly neutral and simple ability for detached thought. (DPR 201)

However, as Blum (2012) notes, criticising Murdoch, this picture is incomplete and problematic: incomplete, because attention is not always under the control of the

will; problematic, because at the heart of Murdoch's philosophy is an attack on the notion of the will as central to morality: yet, from what has been said so far, it may seem as if with the idea of attention Murdoch is simply taking the same concept of the will that she opposes, and moving it back from directing action to directing attention.

Contrary to this claim, (although it is true that her use of the concept is not entirely consistent), I argue that Murdoch is not contradicting herself, but that she is to some extent reshaping the notion of will within the context of her thought. The main meaning of the concept of will, Murdoch writes, is the one inherited from the analytic tradition she is engaging with. There, will is 'immediate straining ... against a large part of preformed consciousness' (MGM 300), like when duty clashes against desire, with the will fighting against a consciousness which inclines toward vice and fantasy. Will, in this picture, is partly separate from the background of consciousness, and always involves effort and an active opposition to the self.

Murdoch does not entirely discard this notion of the will, and claims that sometimes an effort of will of that kind is required for attention, when the habit to attend is not engrained in one's character: moments of reverie or brooding can be interrupted by a wilful effort to pay attention to what is in front of one.¹⁴⁴ However, more often in Murdoch the will plays a rather different role: it is not an extraneous element moving against consciousness, but an integral part of it, within a conception of the individual in which the various elements and faculties are in mutual relation (cf. MGM 330). On the one hand, the will does direct attention and imagination, thus contributing to the formation not only of individual beliefs and thoughts, but also of the general background of consciousness of the individual. On the other, will also emerges from the background of consciousness: central to Murdoch's thought is the idea that the quality of the individual's consciousness influences and constrains the world she sees, and 'will cannot run very far ahead of knowledge' (SG 44) – which reinforces the necessity to purify consciousness and make it adhere to reality through attention. On the 'holistic' picture of humanity drawn by Murdoch, the will is less like a single and independent faculty, and more

¹⁴⁴ On this point, Murdoch sees herself as departing from Weil: 'Simone Weil says that will does not lead us to moral improvements ... moral change comes from an *attention* to the world ... Such a view accords with oriental wisdom (and with Schopenhauer) to the effect that ultimately we ought to have no will ... But a realistic morality cannot dispense with the idea of will' (MGM 52-3).

closely connected with the rest of the individual, not rising free from the rest of the inner life, but inextricably connected with it: 'will and reason then are not entirely separate faculties in the moral agent. Will continually influences belief ... and is ideally able to influence it though a sustained attention to reality' (SG 40). It is on this point that Murdoch's concept of the will clearly diverges from the 'existentialist' unbridled free will that she opposes, where the will can rise against the consciousness of the individual and is free to choose anything at all.¹⁴⁵

Attention, rather than being merely a product of the will, allows will and vision to be unified, because the will to see justly (to attend) is foremost in coming to understand the object, and in turn, once the object has been properly attended to, the will is to a large extent (if not wholly) determined by the content of the just vision. Here we return, under a different light, to the motivational internalism observed in the previous chapter: 'man is not a combination of impersonal rational thinker and personal will. He is a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees' (SG 40). What we can will, in other words, depends on what we see. In the case of attention, the link is even stronger: attention, in the best instances, presents situations in such a way that the response is embedded in what is perceived, so that the will finds itself entirely constrained by that reality. This is the idea of 'obedience' inherited from Weil, where the will is exercised, paradoxically, in conforming to what appears as necessary. The experience is rare, made possible by exceptionally sharp and keen attention.

Murdoch's notion of the will, then, is not completely 'free', but dependent, like any other faculty, on the 'quality of consciousness' of the individual; such consciousness is, however, partly influenced by the will itself at various moments. What we have, then, is what Antonaccio calls a 'reciprocal' relation of willing and vision or consciousness, where one influences and constrains the other, and vice versa (Antonaccio 2000: 145-153).¹⁴⁶ Moreover, willed acts of attention can, like

¹⁴⁵ Whether that is a fair description of the existentialist will, is not something that concerns me at present: what matters is to clarify what Murdoch's conception of the will is like, and what it is not. See Ch.2 fn.113.

¹⁴⁶ Antonaccio (2000: 145-53) sees Murdoch as positioned between a Socratic and an Augustinian view of the relation between vision or knowledge and will, which she calls, following Taylor (1989: 136-9), 'linear' and 'circular', respectively. On the Socratic linear view, the will depends entirely on knowledge, so ignorance of the Good is the only cause for moral error; on the Augustinian circular view, will and vision influence each other, but the will has some degree of freedom from the background of consciousness, and can pull the individual against the Good even when the Good is recognised. While this position is largely compatible with the one I have presented, I position Murdoch closer to the Socratic view because, while she acknowledges that the will can rise against

many other activities, become habitual, attention becoming more spontaneous the more it is exercised. In this respect, attention is not very different to a skill that one can learn, like swimming or following the story in a book, where one is not always, but sometimes is, making a conscious decision. ‘Love is desire for good, virtue being *in love* with good’ (MGM 343): love of the Good is part of attention, and, as being ‘in love’ suggests, the virtuous person is the one who has made attention into a habit. Attention can thus be considered as part of a virtuous training, where will creates habit, which then no longer requires the exercise of the will: virtuous patterns of attention are cultivated, until the individual finds that attention occurs spontaneously, where spontaneous attention is not conceived in opposition to willed attention.¹⁴⁷

It is still possible, on Murdoch’s understanding of the will as partly determined by consciousness, to be held responsible for one’s attention or failure to attend. The difference is that the control one has upon attention is not ‘direct’, but rather a matter of continual piecemeal habituation and steering of consciousness in a particular direction, upon particular objects, which will then yield spontaneous attention. Here we can see how the different conceptions of attention (as faculty, attitude, activity, cf. Ch.3§2.5) are linked: while attending is the activity of exercising the faculty of attention, such activity can become habitual, and attention turns into something more like an attitude or state of mind.

There is, however, one last aspect of the relation between attention and will which goes beyond the picture just drawn and makes it more difficult to claim responsibility for the agent: the cases in which attention is ‘caught’ by an external reality, as in the case of the brooding philosopher who is distracted by the presence of a kestrel outside her window (SG 84), or when someone else tries to direct our attention to something they think we should be (more) aware of, but we are too complacent or resistant or even ignorant to see.¹⁴⁸ In these cases, attention is not the

(ordinary) consciousness, she remains faithful to the idea that, if true Good is recognised, the will cannot but desire it and automatically conforms itself to it. Hence the idea of obedience.

¹⁴⁷ Traditionally, in psychology, the distinction is between spontaneous and voluntary attention, one being natural, the other ‘artificial’, effortful and only lasting for a few moments (cf. Ribot 1890: 8 and James 1891: 416, quoted in Evans 1970: 92ff). Evans (1970) questions the simplicity of the distinction, as does implicitly Murdoch, on the present reading, by establishing a mutual relation between willed and spontaneous attention.

¹⁴⁸ On the problem of how to correct one’s moral perception when the individual herself may be lacking the resources to do so, see Clarke (2012), who suggests that what she calls the problem of ‘wherewithal’ can be avoided by comparing one’s perceptions with those of others, on the model

product of the will, nor dependent upon the background of consciousness of the individual. Yet, even in the case where attention is neither willed, nor spontaneous in the sense described above, it can still play its morally purifying role by removing concern from the self and directing it to something external. These examples introduce the important idea, rarely found in Murdoch (but not absent), that sometimes the individual alone cannot do all the moral work required. Attention can be aided by external stimuli and explicit exhortations from others, by being alerted by others to something one is unable to see, or by comparing one's view with that of other people. Even in these cases, when attention is involuntary and claimed by something external, however, personal responsibility is not absent: the kestrel's claim for attention can be only a momentary jolt one out of one's reverie and then the brooding can recommence, and the friendly advice can be entertained briefly and quickly discarded. For such external stimuli to become sources of attention in a fruitful way, the subject needs to collaborate: to be willing or make oneself available to *sustain* the attention, in order for the significance and truth of the object to be fully disclosed. Either habit or will can accomplish that.

Lastly, it needs to be remembered that neither will nor habit, for which the subject can claim responsibility, guarantee that attention is properly exercised and yields clear vision. In other words, attention is an effort or an attempt, and as such in itself valuable, and also likely to improve one's grasp of reality, but clear vision may not ensue. This is the idea we encountered above in relation to the mysterious factors in achieving attention (§1.1). That includes, among other things, the possibility of 'moral luck', and is sometimes expressed by Murdoch when she talks about 'grace':

Plato tells us in the *Meno* that virtue cannot be taught, neither is it natural, it comes by divine gift. This does not of course mean accidentally or without effort. Help from God or the unconscious mind must normally be thought of as arriving in a context of attending and trying. (MGM 178)

What we can do is do our best and put ourselves in a position where reality is visible; but that does not guarantee success.¹⁴⁹

for example of feminist consciousness-raising groups, which in turn help the individual to identify patterns by which she can correct or amend her perceptions.

¹⁴⁹ To avoid an unreasonable over-demandingness, it needs to be observed that responsibility in attention has limits. While it is to a large extent possible for one to control the direction and quality of one's consciousness, through will and discipline, there are factors that influence attention and that are not within one's control. Think for example of some cases of mental disorders, such as paranoia

Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter has been to analyse the concept of attention, as presented by Murdoch, and to bring out the elements that make it a specifically moral concept. Three elements have been singled out: its desire for goodness, its truth-revealing capacity, and its link with personal responsibility. The desire for goodness, which manifests itself as the desire to attend justly and see clearly, is the central element of Murdoch's normative concept of love. Love is desire for the Good, where the aspiration towards the ideal standard animates the relationship between the lover and the object of love. Integral to such aspiration is the dual desire to discover value in the object, and to see the object justly, which is what happens when attention is animated by desire for the Good. The fact that love is essentially desire for the Good and thus an attitude that can be applied to any object dispels the worry that love may be in conflict with the clear vision that attention is supposed to bring about. On the contrary, by defeating possessiveness and motivating attention, love contributes positively to clarifying perception.

The idea that attention includes desire for the Good, manifest as a loving attitude, clarifies the problem of how to make sense of Murdoch's idea that attention is directed to the Good. What I have suggested is that attention is not directly fixed on the Good, because the Good is not an object of perception, but that the idea of the Good, formed through perception of good objects in the world, is the guiding light, or inspiration, of attention.

Thus inspired, attention can focus itself on various objects. Two questions arise in relation to the objects of attention: whether anything is a legitimate object of attention, and whether there are criteria for identifying the most salient objects of attention. The first question is answered positively, because attention is valuable in itself, but also because attention needs to be in principle open to focusing on any object that may require it. As for the second question, Murdoch suggests, both implicitly and explicitly, various possibilities: beauty, goodness, presence, responsibility, humanity. None of these, however, can constitute the sole object of attention, or the most salient, before the particular situation has been appraised. The suggestion is that, instead of providing criteria for object selection, attention itself,

or delusion, where it seems out of place to put moral blame on the subject for not exercising proper attention.

at the level of ‘open’ or suspended attention, can survey a situation and select the objects to which ‘focused’ attention should be devoted.

Lastly, the requirement of responsibility for attention as a moral concept has been examined in relation to the possibility of willing attention. While attention can be the result of a will that strains against the background of consciousness, Murdoch sees the will as something integrated in consciousness, with which it has a circular relation: will shapes consciousness by directing thought, and consciousness delimits perception, thus shaping the will as well as presenting it with limited objects to choose among. One’s responsibility, in this picture, lies not only in willed and punctual acts of attention, but also and mostly in the piecemeal training of consciousness to develop virtuous habits of attention.

This chapter concludes the exposition and analysis of the moral concept of attention begun in Chapter 3. The chapters have explored the role of the mind in attention and the importance of having a particular quality of consciousness or states of mind in order to perceive clearly. Specifically, I have emphasised the role of intrinsically moral or virtuous states of mind, including love, in the perception of reality. As argued in Chapter 2, reality for Murdoch includes moral reality. In the following chapter, the role of virtuous states of mind is combined with the existence of a moral reality in the analysis of moral perception. What is still missing from the justification of the importance of attention in morality is the explanation of why clear perception – which is supposed to be the central outcome of attention – is of primary moral importance, as opposed to action on the one hand, and to the application of principles on the other. That is the goal of Chapter 5.

Chapter 5

Moral Perception

Introduction

The discussion of attention so far has proceeded along two lines: on the one hand, Murdoch's metaphysical commitment to the existence of a moral reality in the world, which is not created or projected by the mind (Chapter 2); on the other, Murdoch's insistence on the evaluative nature of consciousness, and on the ways in which values structure cognition and yield apprehensions of the world with varying degrees of correctness (Chapters 3-4). On the face of it, these two aspects of Murdoch's philosophy seem incompatible, but in Chapter 2 I offered a potential resolution which, whilst not explicitly endorsed by Murdoch, nevertheless outlined a way in which her seemingly incompatible desiderata, of moral facts and evaluative cognition, might be met.

The idea, in brief, is that the world possesses features which the mind latches on to in apprehending it, but apprehension can only occur through the structures and 'tools' of the mind, including, primarily, an evaluating imagination which operates through concepts. On the one hand, therefore, something is genuinely there, including features of reality that are correctly conceptualised as value; on the other, because consciousness is inherently evaluative, apprehension of the world proceeds through evaluation, but the standard of correctness of the concepts through which apprehension takes place depends on the real features of the world. Because apprehension of reality necessarily takes place through an inherently evaluative cognition, the optimal state of mind for correct apprehension is itself a moral one. That state is what I have been calling 'attention'.

Imagination, which uses concepts and is structured by value, Murdoch argues, is involved in any interaction of the mind with the world, including the most basic interaction that is perception. Because Murdoch also holds that values are features of reality, perception is both an evaluative and a value-apprehending faculty. Instead of being projected or inferred, value is discovered as part of the world by attentive perception. This chapter draws the threads of the previous four together, by exploring how the encounter of an evaluative mind with a moral reality

occurs, in the most basic way, through *moral perception*, and how that is made possible by the correct state of mind, which is attention.¹⁵⁰

Attention is the faculty or attitude of moral perception: its central feature is the ability to yield clear perception of what confronts the subject. The attentive subject is ideally placed to perceive, or ‘see’, clearly. The object of moral perception is moral reality. In the previous chapter I have suggested that attention itself can reveal what is salient within the scope of one’s perception (Ch.4§3.2). Moral perception does not need to be conceived as stopping at the discovery of what is salient, but it can also include the perception of specific moral properties. I shall argue that both moral salience and moral properties are revealed by the attentive perception of moral reality.

The only example Murdoch gives of the activity of moral perception is that of M and D, where no details are provided as to how the mother’s perception changes. Did she *construe* the situations involving D differently, so that the same facts were given a different interpretation? Or did something new strike her, which did not come into her awareness before, so that her new judgment included new perception and new facts? Using different examples, I am going to argue for the second alternative, and for the idea that, for Murdoch, value is *found* in reality and directly perceived.

1 The Morality of Perception

Moral perception, particularly in the context of Murdoch’s philosophy, can be understood in two ways, as noted by Scott Clifton (2013). One relates to the object of perception, the other to the instrument or means. First, moral perception refers to the idea that clear perception reveals a morally relevant reality, and is thus essential to having appropriate moral understanding and responses;¹⁵¹ second, moral perception refers to the notion that one’s perceptions are expressive of one’s

¹⁵⁰ Unless explicitly stated, I here use ‘moral perception’ as a success phrase, indicating accurate perception or perception of what is the case, and made possible by attention. In this use I differ from Margaret Holland (1998) who distinguishes moral perception from attention, insofar as she considers the former to be neutral as to its correctness, and takes it to mean, more broadly, ‘one’s awareness of, or one’s “take” on, a moral situation’ (Holland 1998: 310). In this respect, her use of moral perception is akin to what I have called (with Blum (2012: 309) and following Murdoch) ‘looking’ in Ch.4§1.1. But this is only a terminological difference: I agree with Holland on the substantive point that ‘moral attention might be described as inner moral work which seeks to improve the quality of perception of independent reality’ (Holland 1998: 310).

¹⁵¹ The formulation ‘morally relevant reality’ is neutral as to the existence of a moral reality, and also as to whether moral properties are perceived or inferred.

moral quality, and that therefore clear or correct perception depends on a morally good quality of consciousness, virtuous attitudes and states of mind. Murdoch's notion of attention includes both these understandings of moral perception.

According to Scott Clifton (2013), however, the main meaning of moral perception in Murdoch is the latter, referring to the moral importance of states of mind, rather than in the moral importance of what those states of mind are about. The ability to perceive correctly or clearly, he argues, is inherently valuable, being a 'moral achievement' whatever its object (Scott Clifton 2013: 211). This claim is, on the one hand, only true to an extent and, on the other, it is itself made true by the value of truth and what truthful perception entails. It is not entirely true because, while clear vision always involves, on Murdoch's view, the direction of concern to the real and thus at least momentary selflessness, it also matters what one focuses one's attention on, and what one consequently neglects (cf. Ch.4§3.2): the moral achievement of attention also involves being able to apprehend the relative salience of things, and thus to focus on what requires or merits attention most. Secondly, the value of seeing rightly and exercising the related virtues would be harder to understand if the reality that we were attending to were not valuable (cf. Ch.2§3). Virtue, in other words, is not a matter of making sure we are in a virtuous state, but of making sure that we are seeing what is really there, not for our sake, but for the sake of whatever it is that we are seeing. Both points emerge, for instance, in Murdoch's comments on the Zen practise of meditation. Seeing stones and insects lovingly, justly and accurately is an exercise of virtue and, as such, it is a good thing to do. But part of its value depends, on the one hand, on the value of truth and reality, and on the other, on the fact that meditation is good training for seeing clearly things that matter more: one needs to return to the world and to other people. The real importance of observing stones and insects lovingly lies partly in its ability to train oneself to thus see other people and situations (MGM 244).¹⁵² It seems like a striking inversion of priority to claim, instead, that 'what makes attention ... a moral achievement is not found in the specific cases in which an agent is able to see the suffering of others, but in all cases in which the agent sees the world aright

¹⁵² In this respect the Zen sage is similar to the person who, having contemplated the Good, returns to the cave in Plato's myth in the *Republic*. Murdoch makes similar remarks about the contemplation or creation of art, which she considers as an exercise of virtue and an image of virtue, while adding that morality is mainly played out in our dealings with other people, in whether we respond appropriately to them and their needs.

as a result of the “suppression of self” (Scott Clifton 2013: 211-12). Adopting this view would, besides obscuring the reasons why the virtues involved in attention are considered such, shift the focus of attention onto the subject, at the expense of the reality outside the subject, which, as Murdoch stresses, is the proper object of attention.

While Murdoch does insist on the importance of the moral quality of the psychological states involved in perception, the moral importance of perception cannot be separated from the importance of the object perceived, which is in fact primary: while, on the one hand, attention occasions the ‘moral purification’ of the subject and requires a good quality of consciousness to be successful (this is the evaluative nature of consciousness as discussed in Ch.3-4), on the other, that is achieved by directing the focus on, and making possible the perception of, a reality outside the subject which is morally important in its own right (this is main idea of Murdochian moral realism, as proposed in Ch.2). The importance of the latter is central to what follows, where I focus on how a reality which is morally relevant in its own right can be apprehended as such by the moral activity of consciousness.

2 Weak and Strong Moral Perception

The idea that reality is morally relevant, and that therefore correct perception is crucial to moral understanding, can be interpreted in two ways. As we saw in relation to the value of truth in Chapter 2§3, reality can be morally relevant in a purely instrumental way, as the basis for the application of moral principle; or it can be morally relevant in itself. In the first case, the idea is that correct perception of the facts is a necessary step in the application of principles: the content of perception has no moral relevance in itself, but derives it from being the subject matter of moral judgment. Neither the faculty nor the object of perception have moral qualities in themselves, but clear perception is necessary in order to judge correctly, apply principles to the right facts, deliberate having the right information. If perception is considered as a morally neutral presentation of morally neutral facts, however, it does not seem appropriate to speak of moral perception, but only of (accurate) perception.

The notion of moral perception involves, minimally, the idea that perception reveals something that is morally relevant in its own right. Therefore, only the second understanding of the importance of correct perception refers to moral

perception. That can itself be understood in two ways. On the first, ‘weak’ conception, perception has a preparatory role for moral understanding, but does not by itself yield a moral judgment, nor is it sufficient to provide motivation. Principle-based theories can also endorse this view of moral perception, as Blum (1994) has argued. Although most principle-based theories have underestimated the role of moral perception (and thus endorse only the first aspect of the value of perception above), principle application requires a faculty that presents the situation *as* a moral one – as a situation in which moral considerations and principles are called for – as well as indicating when or how to apply the principles, which is something the principles themselves cannot do.¹⁵³

Blum’s analysis shows how principle-based theories can make room for moral perception by weakening, but not essentially eroding, the centrality of principles. Moral perception here is the faculty that, by latching onto features of reality, presents the situation as a moral one, identifies the relevant aspects, selects the relevant principles, and shows how those principles are to be applied and through what course of action. All this could be said of attention, as enabling successful moral perception: on this understanding, attention can have a limited but fundamental role in principle application. If that were all that attention did, then one would not be committed to the idea that perception reveals a moral (and motivating) reality, but only a reality that is morally relevant, and the perception that results from attention would function as a *basis* for moral understanding.

However, Blum also indicates ways in which moral perception is more than a bridge between facts and principles, and in doing so gives reasons to question the correctness of principle-based theories: the moral perception of the situation includes moral salience. Moral perception construes the situation as the situation that it is, prior to the operation of judgment. And crucially, on some occasions, the individuated moral situation itself contains reasons for action, in which case principles are not even required. Lastly, moral perception (unlike judgment) can provide proper moral understanding, but such that it does not entail reasons or

¹⁵³ Kant addressed this problem by introducing ‘judgment’ as the bridge between rules or principles and particular situations: judgment shows to what circumstances a given rule applies, what counts as applying it, how it needs to be applied. Moreover, judgment is required to recognise certain features of a situation as morally significant. Blum (1994) sees the role of judgment, to this extent, as akin to that of moral perception. His criticism is that most deontological theories fail to recognise that judgment involves specifically moral capacities that go beyond what the principles can provide.

motivation to act. With these consideration, Blum moves towards a ‘stronger’ view of moral perception,¹⁵⁴ where moral perception is not only instrumental in implementing principles, but it also includes the possibility of bypassing them altogether and thus of providing, by itself, moral understanding as well as reasons and motivation.¹⁵⁵ On the ‘strong’ conception of moral perception, perception is not only preparatory for judgment and deliberation, but it also reveals a reality which on its own carries moral information or content: a *moral reality* which includes moral properties, providing reasons and motivation. I shall argue that the concept of attention, in the context of Murdoch’s philosophy, refers to the latter, most demanding, understanding of moral perception. Attention involves morally laden perception of moral reality.¹⁵⁶

3 Moral Differences are Conceptual Differences

Attention is the virtuous attitude or faculty which enables perception of reality, including moral reality. Moral reality, in Murdoch’s thought, divides into two kinds: the Good or guiding ideal, of which she says that ‘there exists a moral reality: a real though infinitely distant standard’ (SG 31); and what she has called ‘moral facts’ (VCM 95), considered as instantiations of moral properties in the world. This distinction runs along the lines of thin and thick moral concepts. The thin ‘Good’ is, as Murdoch observes, not itself perceptible, due to its nature as an ideal. A limited grasp of the Good is made possible through the perception of moral properties in the world, which act as ‘hints’ or assembled suggestions of the idea of the Good: on Murdoch’s ‘degree of perfection’ argument, the Good is what we intuit by recognising recurrences and patterns among perceptible instances of

¹⁵⁴ While Blum (1994) is gesturing towards the understanding of moral perception whereby the object of perception is itself reason giving and motivating, he does not claim that perception can always play this role, nor does he want to deny the importance of judgment and deliberation.

¹⁵⁵ As Chappell (2008) observes, there is a distinction between the two that the Platonic idea of ‘to be pursuedness’, on which Murdoch relies, does not account for; moreover, one can lead to the other, and motivation itself may not always lead to action. While the distinction is important, the present account of moral perception is meant to include both reasons and motivation.

¹⁵⁶ The labels of ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ come from Scott Clifton (2013: 208). Scott Clifton claims that Murdoch is only committed to the weak view, although she considers the strong view as an ideal. In this chapter, instead, I present Murdoch as arguing for the strong view: even if it was the case that the necessity that Murdoch sees as created by attentive perception were an ideal – and it is not clear that it is: think of Martin Luther’s ‘here I stand’ – that would not be a reason to exclude it. In fact, the notion of an ideal is very important in Murdoch’s philosophy, where the ideal of perfection is the main provider of inspiration and moral energy.

‘goodness’, which can be manifest as compassion, justice, benevolence, etc. We start from what we perceive and reach up to the ideal.

Value in the world is, therefore, epistemically primary. That is why moral perception refers primarily to value in the world, and why that is the main outcome of attention. For these reasons, in this section I discuss moral perception not as perception of the Good, which is not possible, but of moral properties, such as the kindness of a smile, or the injustice of a sentence. The idea that value can be perceived directly and therefore is real, which Murdoch calls an ‘argument from perception’, is better described as a phenomenological account of moral perception, which is often, as we saw in Chapter 1, Murdoch’s starting point. Not the last word, but the first, is said by human experience of morality. What needs to be done is to take a closer look at such experience and search for explanations. Let us begin the exploration with two examples.

On April 17, 2015, *The Sun* columnist Katie Hopkins published a piece in response to the sinking of a refugees’ vessel off the Libyan coast resulting in over 400 deaths. Under the headline ‘Rescue boats? I’d use gunships to stop migrants’, Hopkins wrote: ‘No, I don’t care. Show me pictures of coffins, show me bodies floating in water, play violins and show me skinny people looking sad. I still don’t care ... These migrants are like cockroaches ... Drilling a few holes in the bottom of anything suspiciously resembling a boat would be a good idea, too’ (Hopkins 2015). This contemporary example can be put side by side with a parable, used by Simone Weil to illustrate attention and moral perception (WG 103): the parable of the Good Samaritan (introduced in Chapter 3§3). While the Levite and the priest walk past with only a glance, the Samaritan stops to help the injured man by the side of the road (Luke 10:29-37). Both are cases where something seems to go wrong in some of the participants’ moral responses. What goes wrong and why – specifically, whether the moral failure can be understood as a failure of attention, which in turn causes an incorrect perception – are the questions at hand.

On one model, advocated among others by R.M. Hare (1952), one of the main targets of Murdoch’s critique, the examples are analysed in terms of perception of non-evaluative facts (‘people attempting to illegally migrate to Europe and drowning while doing so’, ‘an injured man lying by the side of the road’, etc.) plus the application of principles to those facts (‘immigration to one’s country must be prevented’ or ‘the necessity to prevent crime caused by immigrants in one’s

country trumps all other considerations’, or ‘one is not morally required to stop and help a stranger’, etc. etc.), which yield moral conclusions – in Hare’s case, in the form of a prescription (‘do what you can to stop immigration regardless of other circumstances’, ‘do not stop to help a stranger’, etc.). Assuming for the sake of argument that the conclusions presented in these two cases are morally problematic, Hare’s model would presumably explain the flaw as arising from incorrect basic principles, or from the application of inappropriate principles to the specific situation, resulting in incorrect prescriptions.

The alternative to this view begins by questioning the idea that the ‘facts’ perceived, upon which deliberation takes place, are the same for all involved: for example, whether Hopkins has the same perception of the refugees’ situation as someone who takes it as imperative to rescue and help them. In the Hopkins example, two elements can be taken as signs that the disagreement rests on perception, or the way the situation is present to the agent. First, the concepts used to characterise the people involved in the shipwreck are clearly evaluative: the migrants are ‘cockroaches’, ‘spreading like norovirus’; second, what much of the column presents is not so much a conclusion yielded by rational deliberation, but an affective-evaluative response, determined by a particular perception of the facts: ‘I don’t care’, where the suggestion is that the events at hand *merit* such response. Perhaps more clearly than in the case of the Samaritan, where the perception is to be evinced by the actions, Hopkins’s case makes explicit the way in which the situation and the people involved are constructed and conceptualised, and indicates the responses that she finds appropriate. The suggestion here is that the difference in perception depends on the different concepts deployed. This is central to Murdoch’s view of the morality of perception, as we shall see.

To these considerations, Hare and the philosophers inspired by him might reply that ‘cockroach’ is a metaphor for which a literal term can be substituted, and that because the whole description is of a ‘thick’ kind, it can be analysed into evaluative and descriptive components. What is left when the evaluative element is removed are the ‘facts’, which are the same for everyone. This objection leads into a familiar debate about thick concepts, the ‘inseparability’ of which was originally defended by McDowell (2001d). McDowell argues against non-cognitivism and the separability of fact and value in thick concepts by exposing, inspired by Wittgenstein, a hidden assumption that the non-cognitivist makes: that the correct

application of concepts requires rules which are specifiable independent of any perspective and of the responses that the reality which some concepts refer to tends to elicit. McDowell replaces this metaphysical conception of rules underlying concept use – which stands in need of justification – with a less rigid conception where the correct application of concepts is established from within the community of concept users, as well as with reference to the world:

If the disentangling manoeuvre is always possible, that implies that the extension of the associated term, as it would be used by someone who belonged to the community, could be mastered independently of the special concerns which, in the community, would show themselves in admiration or emulation of actions seen as falling under the concept. (McDowell 2001d: 201)

Like Murdoch, McDowell acknowledges that concepts, while referring to reality, are also human tools, and as such need to be understood in the context of human responses and concerns. This model for understanding concepts appears like a development of Murdoch's stress on the development of language and concepts as occurring within human contexts and in reference to a common object of attention: 'we learn through attending to contexts, vocabulary develops through close attention to objects, and we can only understand others if we can to some extent share their contexts' (SG 32). Thus Murdoch ties the evaluative nature of human cognition, of which concepts are a product, with the epistemological primacy of the reality (including human reality) that concepts are meant to capture, without sacrificing one to the other.

The individual's moral understanding of particular facts, therefore, shows itself in the concepts that she employs in relation to them. As Murdoch puts it, 'moral differences are conceptual differences' (VCM 82). While some concept schemes are compatible with others, in relation to a specific situation or object, others are not, because not all conceptualisations of particular facts are correct, i.e. fitting with reality. The further step that we need to take, with Murdoch, involves the presence of concepts in perception: if concepts are part of perception, then moral differences are also differences in perception.

3.1 Concepts in Perception

The possibility of considering concepts as penetrating all the way down to perception begins to appear with the idea that concepts determine not only how something should be construed, but what something is. If perception is to reveal particular objects, rather than a mass of sense data, it will require concepts to do so.

By conceptualising the situation in different ways, the Samaritan and the Levite, for example, can be said to perceive something different.

The idea that perception itself operates through concepts is supported by McDowell, who can be considered the contemporary philosopher who most effectively develops Murdoch's views about cognitivism. McDowell (2006) argues that the possibility of having perception-based beliefs, taken as manifestations of rationality, is explained by appealing to the rationality of the perception itself. In order to take perceptual experience as a reason in belief formation, the perception has to be rational. To be rational, on McDowell's definition, is to be able to respond to reasons as such (it is not required that we always do so, but only that we have the capacity to do so). And in order to do so, one must be able to deploy conceptual capacities. Therefore, to take perception as grounds for belief, perception needs to be, potentially, an exercise of conceptual capacities.

This argument is not present in Murdoch, but the conclusion it argues for is what she wants for her picture of perception. Rather than talking about rationality and responses to reasons as such, Murdoch invokes the imagination as a moral and concept-deploying activity inherent in perception.¹⁵⁷ Central to Murdoch's epistemology is the idea that perception does not only provide the material for moral thinking, but is itself a form of evaluation: 'our deepest imaginings which structure the world in which "moral judgments" occur are already evaluations. Perception itself is a mode of evaluation' (MGM 314-5). The encounter between the evaluating mind and value in the world occurs, as I have suggested, thus: the evaluating mind approaches the world and makes sense of it through its faculties. Such faculties are structured by value and operate through concepts. Even in perception, which is the most basic encounter between mind and world, the world does not presents itself to us brutally as unconceptualised sense-data, but via the imaginative evaluative concept-using activity just described.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Commenting on Kant's notion of the imagination, Murdoch argues that it should be extended or modified thus: '...the world around us is constantly being modified or "presented" (made or made up) by a spontaneous creative free faculty which is not that of "reason" thought of as "beaming in" upon purely empirical situations not otherwise evaluated' (MGM 314). Note the distinction between 'made' and 'made up': that corresponds to the distinction between imagination 'proper' and that corrupted form of imagination, fantasy.

¹⁵⁸ Strikingly, this move also puts moral and non-moral reality on the same epistemological level: they are both real and discovered by an active concept-using evaluative imaginative faculty. To claim that perception, and more generally consciousness, is evaluative, means that every situation is approached in an evaluative way. Since individuals have only partial access to reality, as opposed to a God's eye perspective, apprehension is inevitably perspectival, and value partly determines such

4 Motivational Internalism

The reality that moral perception discloses, on the ‘strong’ conception of moral perception, is a moral reality. As such, it involves moral properties, the correct perception of which also includes appropriate responses and attitudes. In other words, strong moral perception involves motivational internalism, a notion introduced in previous chapters and that we can now examine in more detail. Murdoch’s motivational internalism can range from certain responses being suggested to the subject by correct perception, up to an extremely close correlation of perception and response, where the most successful acts of attention reveal the situation so clearly and vividly that the perceiving subject will feel compelled to act as (she perceives) the situation demands.

The idea that concepts (as well as perception and cognition, of which they are the instruments) reach both ways, to the world and to the mind, has important implications for justifying this idea. The first implication is drawn out by McDowell: concepts are human ways of grasping the world, and as such they participate in the ‘form of life’ in which they are developed, which includes particular desires, concerns and responses.¹⁵⁹ It follows that some concepts *include* certain attitudes and responses: correctly grasping a concept involves having the response that is appropriate to that concept, in the same way that going to see King Lear and sitting through it with a sense of light amusement may indicate failure not just to respond, but also (through the lack of response) to understand the play.¹⁶⁰

perspective (hence the possibility of various compatible but different perceptions of the same situation). This does not imply, however, that every concept is a moral concept, because within an evaluatively perceived situation, moral perception picks out which elements of reality are moral and which are not. While anything can in principle be morally relevant, depending on the context, not everything always is. While for Murdoch, as Diamond puts it, ‘we are perpetually moralists’, that only means that ‘our thought about anything is the thought of a morally live consciousness, a consciousness with its own moral character’ (Diamond 1996: 102), but not that everything that such morally live consciousness perceives is perceived *as moral*. Thus, the evaluative nature of consciousness is combined with the existence of a moral reality that consciousness picks out, by deploying the appropriate concepts.

¹⁵⁹ While the idea of community of concept users, or ‘forms of life’ following Wittgenstein, can refer to a relatively small community, and thus pose the threat of cultural relativism, it can also refer broadly to the human community. Reading Wittgenstein, Conway (1989) distinguishes between a broad and a narrow meaning of ‘form of life’, the former referring to patterns of human behaviour, the latter to specific cultures. The former interpretation is endorsed, for example, by Hanfling (2002). The present argument is limited to the broader sense.

¹⁶⁰ For these reasons, McDowell has famously compared values, being concepts which bear an internal relation to certain responses, to dispositional or secondary properties such as colours (2001c: 146). While the analogy with colour helps to bring out Murdoch’s ideas about the interaction between mind and world that determines concept-formation and hence perception, differently from McDowell, Murdoch holds that not only moral concepts, but all concepts stand in such relation

Murdoch supplements this idea by specifying that the ‘magnetic centre’ of the desires that animate the concept-using human beings is the Good: ‘Good is the magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves’ (SG 102). The role of love in attention, explored in the previous chapter, becomes now relevant to understand Murdoch’s motivational internalism. Love, understood as *eros* or energy, is constantly pulled by the idea of perfection. Murdoch conceives of human beings as being moved by an inexhaustible and omnipresent energy, manifest as desire, which attaches itself to whatever is apprehended as good. All concepts, therefore, participate in this web of energy or desire, determining, as Diamond puts it, ‘magnetic fields’ in reality, which either fits reality or not, depending on whether they depend on correct or distorted perception:

The world in which we act is not motivationally inert but is rather characterised by magnetic fields, as it were, in which actions can be attractive to us, through the kind of place they have in the world as shaped already by perception and by fantasy or imagination. (Diamond 2010: 72)

Because of the dual nature of concepts, tying together mind and world, the motivation or ‘magnetism’ is not dependent on human desire alone, as if it was a projection on an inert reality, but it is also elicited by different objects in different ways. Desiring or being magnetically attracted by the Good, as we have seen, does not mean being attached to an abstract entity in isolation from reality, but perceiving reality in the light of the Good, which contributes motivation, a sense of perfection, and, crucially, the desire and ability to see reality as it is. Therefore, when true Good is desired, or desire is ‘purified’, the motivation that is associated with a particular concept is exactly of the kind that is appropriate, elicited or merited, by the object which the concept captures. Such responses include, therefore, not only attraction to what is good, but more generally whatever is appropriate or required by the situation, which can include a range of attitudes and actions. The right concepts are deployed when reality is perceived correctly, in its real features. That is made possible by the exercise of attention.

4.1 Central Features of a Concept

Moral concepts and the relative responses seem to range between being basic and innate, and sophisticated and developed with experience over time. There are two

between mind and world, because value and desire are never absent from consciousness. Thus, the distinction between primary and secondary qualities collapses in Murdoch, for whom all qualities are perceived through imaginative-conceptual faculties.

aspects to this idea: on the one hand, some concepts are innate and others learned, and therefore some are easier to deploy than others; on the other, the same concept can have more obvious aspects which are picked out immediately, and less salient ones that require time and experience to grasp. The second aspect, concerning the various levels within one concept, is more interesting for my purposes, and it is also something on which Murdoch insists.

An example of basic innate response through the spontaneous deployment of a concept (which can also be vastly deepened) is provided by Weil's analysis of our primitive responses to those we recognise as 'human beings'. Weil argues that, in the presence of other human beings, our recognition shows itself in 'the interval of hesitation', which is at the same time the recognition of the other as an autonomous being, and therefore a limitation to our own will (Weil 1956: 33).¹⁶¹ While the concept 'human being' can be infinitely deepened and includes a multitude of aspects, autonomy is what Weil identifies as the 'kernel' of the concept, being the most salient aspect of it and the first one to be picked out in our encounters with others. As Weil presents it, the concept appears innate and the reaction, in the absence of distracting and distorting elements, follows automatically.¹⁶²

The recognition of someone as a human being manifests itself, primarily, through our hesitation, signalling the recognition of the fact that they are also living and autonomous beings. Our concept of human being, Weil argues, develops out of this reaction, not the other way around, which indicates that a sense of value – of the other as someone to whom I cannot do certain things – is embedded in the very concept.¹⁶³ Commenting on Weil and on the parable of the Good Samaritan, Peter

¹⁶¹ Interestingly, as observed in Ch.3§3, this is the point on which Bok thinks that Weil and Murdoch most clearly agree (Bok 2005: 74).

¹⁶² Motivational internalism, particularly about basic concepts or aspects thereof, is supported by what can be called 'the evolutionary argument' (cf. Chappell 2008: 434), whereby the first and most important concepts that human beings formed were in relation to objects and situations which required specific responses or actions: 'something to flee from', 'something to eat', etc. (Chappell provides this argument as one response that the moral realist can give to the Mackie-inspired puzzle about how any property can be intrinsically motivating: 'the general schema for such motivating representations will be: Pattern P in context C mandates response R from X' (Chappell 2006: 434)). An example of innate concepts that are manifest through the *automatic* response that they are tied to comes from the vervet monkeys, whose three calls, relating to the presence of eagles, leopards, and snakes, generate the response of fleeing in specific ways and directions. See Cosmides and Tooby (1994).

¹⁶³ Peter Winch draws a parallel between Weil and Wittgenstein on this point, in relation to the latter's rejection, in PI, of the idea that pain is a matter of inference from behaviour; rather, the recognition of pain in another person is revealed by one's reaction to them, which is an 'attitude towards a soul' (PI, p.178, quoted in Winch 1989: 105, endnote 6).

Winch (1980) makes the Murdochian and McDowellian point that we can talk of an *internal relation* between the attitude of a person and the object of his attitude.

The attitude or response, in other words, is an integral part of the concept:

Because of the way concepts are formed, and because of their connection with action and the aspirations and values that go with action, the world of which we are aware is one that is impregnated with values. That is to say, our concepts, which give the world its shape, are unintelligible except as concepts exercised by beings whose common life exhibits certain aspirations and values. (Winch 1989: 115)

In the examples above, the indifference accorded to the drowned human beings and the injured person by the road may signify a failure, on the part of those who display it, to clearly perceive what confronts them.¹⁶⁴ Presumably Hopkins, the Levite and the priest would not refuse to call what is in front of them ‘human being’; but that would seem like a superficial acknowledgment, as they do not seem to be fully deploying the concept in the particular instances: lacking the ‘interval of hesitation’, or the minimal ‘care’ that are internally related to the concepts individuating other people and their misfortunes, means, in these particular cases, lacking a full appreciation of the concept ‘human being’; it means an incomplete grasp of what other people and their misfortunes *are*. If attention promotes a clear understanding of what confronts one, these failures can be understood as failures of attention. The conceptualisation that Hopkins, the priest and the Levite have of the people involved, it can be suggested, occurs precisely in the opposite direction to what attention determines: rather than being grounded on the world, they are grounded on the desires, fears, etc. with which they approach the world. The exercise of attention, on the other hand, is sufficient to provide the appropriate response:

True vision occasions right conduct ... The more the separateness and differentness of other people is realised, and the fact that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one’s own, the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing. (SG 66)

Correct perception of the refugees as human beings would, following Murdoch, prevent one from responding to them as if they were things, which is what the proposal to drill holes in their boats, and describing them as ‘viruses’, suggests.

It may be objected, against considering such primitive reactions and hesitations as morally good ones, that ego-driven reactions are also primitive, since for Murdoch selfishness is ‘natural’ to human beings. There is, however, a crucial difference between the morally good or appropriate spontaneous responses

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Gaita: ‘absence of such responses [are]... moral failings and ... fundamental to our sense of what is an intelligible object of moral response’ (Gaita 2004: 145).

generated by attention and those created by self-interest: while in the first case the reaction depends on real features of the world, appropriately conceptualised, in the second case that is precisely what is lacking: the reaction is not one that comes from the world, but from a conceptualisation of it that distorts or obscures its real features.

Failures of attention are failures of moral perception, because, according to Murdoch, self-interest blocks full and clear perception of what confronts one: in relation to the examples above, we can imagine, for instance, nationalistic self-protection in the case of Hopkins, and self-interested desire to arrive at one's destination without inconvenience in the case of the priest and the Levite, or in both cases, the desire to avoid being confronted with the reality of suffering. In the latter case, the wilful ignorance or denial may be motivated precisely by the awareness that deploying the right concepts in the right way would make a claim on one, coupled with the desire to avoid having to respond to such claim. The exercise of attention, by contrast, purifies the self of these distorting factors, and makes reality maximally available to the subject: if the normative concept of human being, as Weil holds, comes from an encounter with reality, then restoring the meaning of the concept in the cases under consideration involves the exercise of attention, which would let the suppressed or distorted reality of other people emerge, or emerge more fully. Reality can exercise a normative pull on the perceiver, but that happens only when reality is perceived clearly and vividly, through the right concepts, which is what attention makes possible.

4.2 Deepening Concepts

Failures of attention can be of two kinds in relation to concepts; on the one hand, a failure to apply the appropriate concept to the situation; on the other, a failure to fully grasp the concept that one applies.¹⁶⁵ Almost all concepts, Murdoch claims, are not something we grasp once and for all (as on the model that McDowell opposes), but, as human tools and parts of human practises, something 'infinitely to be learned', and moral concepts especially so. The meaning of 'human being' –

¹⁶⁵ Blum (1994: 34-5) provides three examples as different cases of moral perception. His second example is close to the second one that I am discussing here: Julio, an employee, has a leg condition that causes him pain and asks Theresa, the administrator of his department to make arrangements to accommodate his disability. Theresa meets some of Julio's demands but constantly falls short of them and makes him feel uncomfortable about asking. As Theresa 'knows' about the disability, so Hopkins 'knows' about the deaths, so. What they fail to see is the *significance*, respectively, of the disability and of those deaths. The failure may be said to amount to a lack of full understanding of what death and disability mean, in the contexts in which they encounter them.

although it has a kernel of meaning described by Weil as the hesitation that encounters with other people cause – develops for each of us over time, changes according to experience, and gets refined the more we pay attention to its use and to the realities in relation to which it is used. This also shows that correct perception, made possible by attention, often requires time and conceptual ‘training’.¹⁶⁶

While some aspects of a concept are more salient than others, appearing as innate and resulting in automatic responses, like the hesitation in the case of ‘human being’, other aspects are less evident and require effort, time, and training to grasp them. Hence the ‘deepening’ of concepts that Murdoch recommends as part of successful moral perception. While the immediate exercise of attention toward a person may disclose a kernel of meaning which is the same for everybody, manifest for instance in the recognition of their autonomous existence, other elements of the content of the perception vary, depending on individual experience with the concept.

Concepts may require ‘deepening’ principally for three reasons, all connected with Murdoch’s idea that reality is ‘transcendent’ (beyond our selves and not immediately available): first, reality is complex, and some realities are infinitely so (human beings being a case in point, as Murdoch stresses), so our grasp of reality will necessarily be slow and gradual, given the limitations of the human mind. Secondly, concepts are also complex, not only in relation to the complexity of reality, but also in relation to the complexity of the attitudes, responses and thoughts of the human beings who use them. Thirdly, as perception is not immediate but mediated by the imagination, which develops with time and experience, so the ability to perceive clearly may require knowledge or training. Therefore, accurate and clear perception of reality through concepts can be a very long process, where experience and the use of a concept in various situations play an important part. All this also means that attention itself, while it can be exercised in individual circumstances and for limited periods of time, is more effective in yielding moral perception when it is trained, and transformed into a habit or attitude.

¹⁶⁶ That is why, as Raimond Gaita puts it, ‘there are no moral whizz-kids’ (2004: 265). On this point, the present view is very close to virtue ethics and the idea that moral excellence is connected more properly with ‘wisdom’ than ‘knowledge’.

4.3 Testing Perception, Testing Concepts

In both cases, while attention enables correct perception, it is also possible to be mistakenly convinced that one is being attentive. It is possible, for example, to take a response originating from self-concerned distortion to be a response to a correctly perceived moral reality, or to believe that one's set of concepts adequately represents a situation. This leads to perceptions that can be distorted in various ways and degrees: we can be blind to some features of the situation, we can perceive the situation in its wholeness but fail to take in its significance, we can apply some completely unfitting concepts to it, or some concepts that are similar to those required but not the correct ones, and so on. If moral concepts are internally connected with motivation, distorted perception also affects responses and action, because a situation perceived in a distorted manner also presents the wrong possibilities for choice, since 'I can only choose within the world I can *see*, in the moral sense of "see", which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort' (SG 37). This highlights the importance of exercising attention and correcting one's perception.

To increase the accuracy of moral perception, perception and concepts can be tested in various ways. First, by self-examination, to make sure that one has no self-concerned reason to perceive things in a certain way. However, given the possibility of self-deception, of which Murdoch is keenly aware, perception and concepts also need to be measured against a reality external to the individual. Thus a second way to improve moral perception is by triangulating one's perception with that of other people. This is particularly important in relation to the deepening of concepts or in relation to more sophisticated concepts, where, as in most cases, the automatic response does not exhaust the concept, and it is necessary to learn and develop the use of the concept through how others deploy it as well as how others respond to the reality the concept is meant to capture.

Moral perception can also change in response to similar prompts to those that change visual perception more generally: as we can be brought to see a duck in what we thought was a rabbit by being told that it could be thus seen, so what seemed like a cold attitude can be read as a protective attempt to conceal emotion, if we are alerted to that possibility. In these examples, we can also see the role of the imagination stressed by Murdoch: in both cases, perception changes by broadening one's conception of possibilities.

These are helpful ways to justify and test the perception of value, but the authority lies with the reality the concepts aim to capture. All the tests, improvements and triangulation depend on their fittingness to the moral reality that is their object. As we saw at the start of the previous section, concepts link mind with reality, but reality provides the starting point for concept creation and deployment (concepts and words develop, as Murdoch puts it, ‘through close attention to objects’, SG 32). These are not tests which establish once and for all the fittingness of the perception to the situation; they are, rather, ways of working on the perception, to change it or refine it.

4.4 Obedience

The kind of response occasioned by perception, as we have seen, can vary between automaticity and responses that require a slower and more sophisticated grasp of concepts. Both in the case of basic or kernel concept deployment and in the case of less evident or more sophisticated aspects of concepts, however, it is possible to perceive so clearly and vividly that the response follows as if by necessity. This is the goal of moral perception, and the acme of attention: ‘if I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at’ (SG 40). This is the idea of ‘obedience’ that, as we saw Murdoch borrows from Weil (Ch.3§3). The Good Samaritan, Weil writes, has a different perception from the Levite and the priest, he *sees* something different, thanks to his bestowal of attention on the injured man; the attention of the Samaritan is such that, having ‘renounced himself’ through the unselfing required by love and attention, he is *compelled* by the reality that presents itself to him, which includes the need of the man and his own ability to help:

Christ taught us that the supernatural love of our neighbour is the exchange of compassion and gratitude which happens in a flash between two beings ... only one stops and turns his attention towards it. The actions that follow are just the automatic effect of this moment of attention. The attention is creative. But at the moment when it is engaged it is a renunciation. (WG 103)

Attention, or clear perception of reality inspired by the Good, can be all that morality requires, including understanding, judgment, and action. This is one sense in which, as Murdoch writes, reality is normative (SG 37). This is also the meaning of Murdoch’s ‘strong’ moral perception, where ‘true vision occasions right conduct’ (SG 66). In most cases, moral perception is only successful to an extent, because it is very difficult to attend and free oneself from the demands of the ego, thus yielding

more tentative responses, or only the recognition of the reasons to respond and of the possibility to do so. But when attention is fully exercised, and perception successful, the recognition of reasons turns into direct motivation, being pulled by the object or situation, as if by necessity.

5 Against Supervenience

Murdoch's moral perception, as we have seen, combines the morality of the perceiving faculties with the morality of the perceived reality. On her model, a moral faculty is required to perceive both moral and non-moral reality. Like any other reality, moral reality is perceived as 'there'. This contrasts with the view that, while morally neutral facts or properties can be objects of perception, moral ones cannot, being instead derived, in various ways, from the perception of morally neutral ones. On Murdoch's view, instead, there is no need to explain moral properties or facts in terms of non-moral ones, for the reasons above. This radical view is not fully accommodated even by most theories of moral perception, where often the attempt is to explain the perception of moral properties in terms of their relation to non-moral ones, for example in terms of supervenience. A.E. Denham (2001) understands Murdochian moral perception in such a way. On Murdoch's model, Denham argues, moral properties are supervenient or 'aspectual properties': they represent ways of seeing a particular situation. Aspectual or supervenient properties are *experienced* as direct objects of perception, although upon analysis they can be found to supervene on other properties, which Denham identifies, in the moral case, with, primarily, 'other people's concerns and interests' (2001: 613).¹⁶⁷ On this model, while moral properties supervene on non-moral ones, they are not fully analysable in terms of the non-moral or base properties because, Denham writes, moral properties are phenomenological, dependent on 'what it is like' to perceive them, while the base facts are not, and can be analysed in other ways. Therefore, for Denham, moral properties are placed on a different ontological level from non moral ones.

¹⁶⁷ In relation to Wittgenstein's notion of aspect-perception (PI part 2 section xi), it is not obvious that it is possible to identify an object which is then seen in one way or another: the duck-rabbit can be seen either as a duck or as a rabbit, but what is the 'it' that can be seen as either? Aspect perception is perception of supervenient properties only if we hold that there is such a thing as a primary object that can be seen in one way or another, but Wittgenstein suggests instead that perception of aspects is primary. See Mulhall (1990) and Baz (2000); also Baz (2010) and Mulhall's (2010) reply.

Denham's account represents an attempt to combine the idea that moral properties are not primary with the possibility of perceiving them, thus avoiding inference: where there is inference, there is no perception. This is the idea that is at the centre of supervenience theories of moral perception generally: although moral properties supervene on non-moral ones, the moral properties are not inferred from the non-moral one. This kind of theory of moral perception has been more fully developed by Robert Audi (2013) who, similarly to Denham, holds that we perceive moral properties via the perception of their 'grounds', which are non-moral.¹⁶⁸ That is because, according to Audi, moral properties are not 'perceptual', but 'perceptible': while they are available to perception, they are so not 'brutely' via the senses only, but via an intellectual ability to represent something as a moral property. Murdoch would agree that the senses are not enough to perceive moral properties, but, given her account of the penetration of imagination and concepts in perception, she would argue that the senses alone are likely not enough to perceive anything.

It is a merit of Audi's theory that it makes moral properties not at all 'queer', equating them with other properties which Audi calls 'perceptible', like anger or intelligence or freedom or relations. Limiting perception to what the senses deliver brutally would deny that all sorts of beliefs that we generally consider as derived from perception – like the belief that water is coming out of the tap, on Audi's example – are a matter of perception at all. Likewise, as in Wittgenstein's example of the smiling face (*Z* §225), it would appear odd to say that when we see a smile, what we really perceive are the upward curve of the line of the mouth, slight wrinkles around the eyes, etc. What we see is a smiling face.¹⁶⁹

While it is possible to infer that water is coming out of tap, or that a face is smiling, that usually happens when someone is not competent with the concepts; for instance, if someone does not know what a smile is. But generally, we do not need to. In fact, the description of the lines in one's face would not necessarily lead one easily to conclude that the face is smiling. Goldie (2007) preserves these

¹⁶⁸ 'Moral perception always comes by way of non-moral perception' (Audi 2013: 35).

¹⁶⁹ "We see emotion." – As opposed to what? – We do not see facial contortions and make inferences from them (like a doctor framing a diagnosis) to joy, grief, boredom. We describe a face immediately as sad, radiant, bored, even when we are unable to give any other descriptions of the features. – Grief, one would like to say, is personified in the face. This belongs to the concept of emotion' (Wittgenstein 1967: §225. See also §220-223).

intuitions while keeping the possibility of inference together with moral perception by comparing moral perception to a skill: while at first the chess player needs to infer what the right moves are, with time and expertise she will be able to just ‘see’ how to beat her opponent. The idea that moral perception requires, to a certain extent, experience, trial and error, and refinement of one’s faculties and conceptual capacities, is also part of Murdoch’s model. However, this process does not exhaust moral perception, which can be more primitive, as Murdoch shows, and in some cases does not need to go through any inferential route at all (as in the handshake example, arguably, or as in the primitive reaction to human beings – and perhaps to some other animals too).

There is, however, another explanation of what happens in the tap and face examples, different from the one offered by Denham and Audi, and which is more fitting with Murdoch’s model of perception. On the supervenience model, we perceive a face or a smile, but only in virtue of perceiving the lines that make them up: the lines are still primary. The same can be said of the ‘skill’ model. By Murdoch’s lights, however, whereby concepts enter perception in virtue of being ‘deep moral configurations of the world’ (VCM 95), there is no reason to suppose that the concept of line is primary relative to the concept of face. Jonathan Dancy has criticised Audi along similar lines, challenging the idea that only that of which we have sensory phenomenal representation, without intrusion of other faculties or of experience, can count as something perceived. A car mechanic, to use Dancy’s example, can be properly represented as hearing the malfunctioning of the water pump, rather than as hearing a particular pattern of sounds; something similar can be said about listening to a song, or to a conversation. The insistence that in these cases there must be a more basic level of description, for Dancy,

is likely to be built upon what I take to be a fundamental mistake in the philosophy of perception, namely the view that the primary, or basic object of perceptual awareness must be things for the sensing of which no training, knowledge or experience is necessary. Those tempted by this view suppose that training, knowledge and experience cannot alter the way in which things look, sound or feel to us. All they can do is to enable us to notice things we would not have noticed before, and no doubt when we are able to do that, our attention may be distracted from the more basic features that are still the primary and proper objects of sensation. Now I think of this view as a mistake. (Dancy 2010: 111)

Murdoch’s view of concepts involves the possibility, as we have seen, of ‘deepening’ the concepts that we use in perception, or at least some of them, so that in many cases perception can be altered by a better grasp of a concept, occasioned

for example by experience and reflection. Besides a basic level of perception, reality is so complex that we can always improve our understanding of what something is, and subsequent perceptions will reflect such progress.

There are further reasons to describe the above examples as cases of perception rather than inference. To begin with, it is not always even *possible* to explain the contents of one's perception in any other terms. The warmth of a handshake, for instance, may not, or at least not always, be satisfactorily defined in terms of the duration or the firmness of the grasp (here we return to the observations concerning thick concepts). In cases like those, the best or only way to explain one's perception to someone unconvinced is – 'look (or try) and see'. Murdoch's conception of moral perception, then, involves the possibility, in moral disagreement, of just *seeing* different things. Hence the importance of being in a state of attention, which gives the subject the best chance of seeing things as they really are. Two attentive individuals, while they may not have exactly the same perception, are at least likely to have compatible perceptions of the same situation.¹⁷⁰

For these reasons, the supervenience model, often presented as the best description of Murdoch's view of moral perception, fails to do justice to her view of perception as conceptual through and through, where the moral difference lies in what we see, and not only what we see things as. On the supervenience model there are non-moral facts upon which moral facts can be said to supervene. For Murdoch, however, it is not always possible to identify any underlying non-moral fact, because there may not be any. Perception can be perception of moral facts.

There would, indeed, scarcely be an objection to saying that there were 'moral facts' in the sense of moral interpretations of situations where the moral concept in question determines *what* the situation is, and if the concept is withdrawn we are not left with the same situation or the same facts. In short, if moral concepts are regarded as deep moral configurations of the world, rather than as lines drawn round separable factual areas, then there will be no facts 'behind them' for them to be erroneously defined in terms of. (VCM 95, emphasis added)

Murdoch is clear: on her view of concepts, there are no neutral facts 'behind' moral concepts. The use of the word 'interpretation' in the quote should not mislead: Murdoch is not suggesting that we can identify non-moral situations, and then

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Weil (1946: 16-19), who notes that, while only God can have the absolutely correct view of a situation (which she calls 'readings'), human beings can achieve at least partially correct views, so that it makes sense of think of possible criteria of correctness, however difficult the attempt to find them is.

interpret them according to moral categories. As the second half of the sentence shows, if concepts are regarded as configurations or interpretations, they are configurations of a reality which is not given independently of them.

Conclusions

In moral perception the central ideas of Murdoch's philosophy come together and the importance of attention for morality becomes evident. Moral perception involves, on the one hand, the evaluative nature of consciousness, which presents reality in a moral light in all its activities, including the fundamental one of perception; on the other, it involves the existence of a moral reality, which Murdoch argues for with the Ontological Argument, which starts from the observation of the perception of moral properties in reality. Moral perception, therefore, refers both to the moral quality of the perceiving mind, and to the moral quality of the perceived reality.

The identification of moral properties, which are out there in reality, is dependent on the subject's possessing the relevant capacities, including not just sense faculties, but moral imagination and concept-competency, with the difference that the recognition of moral properties is far more difficult and often takes time and practise. Attention, as the faculty of moral perception, thus reveals something that the inattentive person just does not see: 'the selfish self-interestedly casual or callous man *sees* a different world from that which the careful scrupulous benevolent just man sees' (MGM 177). So the Samaritan, as Weil claims, sees something different lying by the side of the road from what the priest and the Levite see, and the 'cockroaches' that Hopkins sees are the result of a different perception from that which reveals human beings in need. There is no infallible rule to establish whose perception is correct. But through attention, one can put oneself in the best possible position, examining one's biases and aiming at 'love' and justice, for perceiving correctly.

Because perception operates through concepts, which link mind and world, the correct deployment of moral concepts also involves the appropriate responses. As concepts or aspects thereof can be more or less basic, innate or learned, so the responses that concepts are related to can vary. In all cases, however, because of the internal relation of concept and response, in the most successful cases of moral perception, when a moral reality has been perceived clearly through the appropriate

deployment of the right concepts, the response is automatic. Part of Murdoch's central idea, that 'morality is connected with knowledge' (SG 38), is that correct perception occasions the appropriate responses. There is no need, in these cases, for choosing, deliberating, or applying principles. Correct perception of reality is sufficient for moral understanding and moral action. It follows that the faculty that enables such perception, attention, is central to morality, and attending is the most important habit to cultivate.

The discussion of moral perception establishes the importance of attention in morality. In doing so, it unites the moral importance of the individual's states of mind, where virtue coincides with attention (as argued in Chapters 3 and 4), with the existence of moral properties in the world (Chapter 2). These two ideas of Murdoch's have been presented through a proposed framework which attempts to reconcile her transcendental claims (consciousness is inherently evaluative) with the realist ones (there exists a moral reality).

Attention enables moral perception by desiring the Good and removing obstacles to clear perception, primarily, the distortions that come from the self. The meaning of desire for the Good has been examined in Chapter 4. Why the self is such a negative influence, and how, in what ways, and to what extent the obstacles coming from it are to be removed, is the subject matter of the last two chapters.

Chapter 6

The Self in Attention

Introduction

While the first five chapters of the thesis have demonstrated the importance of attention in morality, based upon Murdoch's framework, the last two chapters explore the ways in which attention is achieved and, more specifically, the role of the self in attention. The discussion of attention in Chapters 3 and 4 has highlighted the role of the self in achieving correct perception: the importance of love in discovering value whilst removing attachment and the possibility of attention being directed by the will, the operations of which depend on the specific background of consciousness of which it is part. In Chapter 5 I have also indicated how objective perception of reality through correct concept deployment can partly depend on a personal 'deepening' of concepts, which is at the same time necessarily perspectival and tested against the reality of the objects that the concepts are meant to capture.

These considerations about the role of the self in attention are problematised not only by the requirement of objectivity in moral knowledge and perception, but also and more specifically by Murdoch's remarks about the self being the main obstacle to attention and hence to moral goodness. If the self is the main impediment to clear perception, and if clear perception is the central requirement of morality, then the self is the main impediment to goodness. If this is true, it appears that what attention and hence morality require is a state of mind which is not only objective, but entirely impersonal. That is one possible understanding of the requirement of 'unselfing', as Murdoch calls it.

In this chapter and the next I attempt to make sense of these considerations in connection with the apparently contrasting positive contribution of the self in attention. Chapter 7 continues the discussion begun here by questioning the possibility of self-knowledge, both necessary to attention but also apparently opposed to it in its self-directed nature. The aim of the present chapter is to examine whether and how the sense of the importance of the self in attention can be retained without compromising the truth-discovering nature of attention, and thus maintain the possibility of the individual's moral improvement through an appropriate configuration of the self. This involves analysing the concept of 'unselfing' (one of

the two central aspects of attention, with love or *eros*) and asking whether it involves eliminating the self, or simply reconfiguring it. The discussion will clarify what the moral task of the attentive individual in relation to the self involves: in what ways, and to what extent, the negative influence of the self ought to be eliminated. The questions addressed in this chapter are, therefore: why is the self the main enemy of moral excellence, and can its negative influence be removed while keeping its positive role?

1 Unselfing as Suppressing the Self

After having introduced, in ‘The Idea of Perfection’ (SG), the idea of moral effort as an effort of attention aimed at seeing the real, in ‘On God and Good’ (SG) Murdoch explains further what such effort requires. More specifically, the second essay examines the impediments to be overcome in order to achieve a correct perception of reality, which is the path of moral improvement. ‘In the moral life’, Murdoch writes in a much-quoted passage, ‘the enemy is the fat relentless ego. Moral philosophy is properly ... the discussion of this ego and of the techniques (if any) for its defeat’ (SG 52). While attention is essential to the moral life, the ego works against it. It follows that, if attention is the effort to see clearly, the ego is connected with distorted perception. And indeed Murdoch continues by introducing another obstacle to goodness, presented as the natural outcome of the equally natural activity of the ego: ‘the enemy of excellence in morality ... is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one’ (SG 59). Fantasy, spun by the ego, is contrasted with reality, made perceptible by attention. The latter constitutes the road to moral excellence: ‘virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is’ (SG 93). The justification of this view of morality and virtue has been the subject matter of the previous chapters. What remains to be done is to look a little closer at the way in which clear vision can be achieved or in which one can fail, and the moral psychology behind it.

While in the quotes above it is the ego that is seen as responsible for fantasy and hence for lack of attention and moral failure, elsewhere Murdoch talks about ‘self’ and ‘psyche’ as operating in the same way. Murdoch does not always distinguish between ‘self’, ‘ego’ and ‘psyche’ for the purposes of identifying what creates fantasies and this, as we shall see, is part of the difficulty in understanding

what the obstacles to attention are. While ‘self’ appears to be a more comprehensive notion, ‘ego’ has a narrower focus, and ‘psyche’ has more technical psychological connotations. In Chapter 6 of MGM, however, Murdoch presents them as if they were the same concept: “‘The self’ sounds like the name of something, soul, ego psyche, essential person’ (MGM 147). For the moment, let us follow Murdoch on this, and use these words to refer to the individual subject of consciousness, which, according to her, includes the tendency to engage in creating illusions: ‘the self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion’ (SG 93). The claims about the self-protective and distorting nature of the mind are presented as empirical claims, partly meant to conform to ordinary observation, and partly derived from Freud. Appealing to what she sees as ‘true and important’ in Freud, Murdoch paints a picture of humanity as moved by ‘quasi-mechanical’ forces, with the overall aim of protecting the self and with the consequence of obscuring reality.¹⁷¹

He [Freud] sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control. Introspection reveals only the deep tissue of ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings. (SG 51)

Creating fantasy is, in this picture, the main tendency of the psyche. Describing the psyche as a ‘mechanism’ highlights that the fantasy-making process is almost automatic and not entirely under one’s conscious control, and thus very difficult to avoid.¹⁷² It is crucial to the present argument, however, that avoiding fantasy, while very difficult, is not entirely impossible: first, *some* degree of conscious control is possible; second, direct conscious control is not always necessary to avoid fantasy, the control being deferred, as we saw in Chapters 4 and 5, to the training of consciousness and the creation of virtuous habits of attention. Therefore, as Murdoch claims, fantasy, defined as ‘the proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and images’, is contrasted with ‘attention to reality’, which is instead ‘what

¹⁷¹ This idea can also be referred back to Simone Weil, who sees the universe, and therefore also human life, as governed by the mechanical forces of necessity – which she calls ‘gravity’. In the case of human beings, gravity manifests itself in the illusions and acquisitive desires that derive from taking one’s position in the universe as central and most important, which de-realises everything else. The opposite of gravity is ‘grace’, which is made possible (but not secured) by attention and obedience.

¹⁷² Two kinds of automatic processes have emerged in this and the previous chapter: on the one hand, the automaticity of responses arising from attentive correct perception; on the other, the automaticity of fantasy. In both cases, however, the automatic process is also under the subject’s control, through the constant redirection of psychic energies which create the quality of consciousness from which these processes emerge (cf. Ch.5§4.4).

counteracts the system' (SG 67). The strong tendency to fantasise is directly related to the importance of attention: the more pervasive distorted perception, the more pressing the requirement to attend. To put the burden of morality on the possibility to counter the 'dear self' is not original to Murdoch.¹⁷³ Her main point, however, is that the self is not only something that we tend to unduly favour, but also that such privileging creates an epistemic failure, distorting our perception and understanding of the world, and *there* is where moral problems begin.

If the aim of morality is to perceive correctly, and if fantasies impede such perception, then the ultimate aim of the subject aspiring to moral improvement must be to eliminate fantasies and to attend to reality and try to perceive it truthfully. This is indeed Murdoch's suggestion. But by claiming that the enemy of the moral life is the self (or ego or psyche), she seems to take the idea further, claiming that it is the self itself, and not just the fantasies it produces, that has to be suppressed: 'the realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of self' (SG 66); 'to silence and expel self, to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye, is not easy and demands a moral discipline' (SG 64). This requirement is condensed in the concept of 'unselfing', which recurs particularly in MGM. The concept is borrowed, like attention, from Simone Weil, a debt which is, as in the case of attention, acknowledged but not fully discussed.¹⁷⁴

There can be several reasons to talk about unselfing or suppressing the self, rather than just the elimination of fantasy. One is that focusing on fantasy as the target of moral criticism could appear to externalise the source of the problem, making the subject's responsibility less clear. For this reason it is important to delimit the scope of fantasy as a morally pernicious element in terms of its cause. Fantasy is morally problematic primarily because it is understood as a distortion that one can be held responsible for – as in the parallel case of attention, where one of the reasons for calling it a moral concept is that one can be responsible for it (cf. Ch.4§1). For these reasons, what is understood here by fantasy is something limited

¹⁷³ In fact, almost all moral theories warn against the natural tendency for self-concern: Aristotle urges to keep care for the self or '*philautia*' (in itself potentially virtuous) within the limits of moderation; Kant recognises the claims of the 'dear self' as the main impediment to following duty; and most forms of utilitarianism, in the principle of equal consideration of interests, cut across the natural tendency to regard one's own interests as special.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. MGM 245: 'the mind is alert but emptied of self... the disciplined practice of various skills may promote a similar unselfing, or "*decreation*" to use Simone Weil's vocabulary'.

to the operations of the self. As Murdoch understands it, fantasy is not only about imagining or indeed believing what is not the case, but it is also characterised by the involvement of the self (what kind of involvement is the problem I consider below) in bringing about the false images or beliefs. Conversely, forms of misperception or false belief which are not caused by some particular feature or state of the self, and thus for which the individual cannot be held responsible, do not fall under the present concept of fantasy, and so do not necessarily oppose or hinder attention (and cannot, therefore, be classed as instances of moral failure). Examples of the latter kind of distortion include many cases of what psychology calls ‘illusions’, both cognitive and perceptual, where the stimulus or the context, rather than the self, causes the alteration in perception or conception.¹⁷⁵ When a stick appears bent in water, or when we see movement in a film instead of a succession of shots, we are not in the grip of fantasy. Nor does fantasy apply to cases when insufficient or misleading information leads to false belief, as in the case of believing that the person we see every morning walking with a child to school is the child’s parent, when they are not (unless one has a particular wish or interest for that to be the case).¹⁷⁶ Cases in which we are being deceived by someone else also fall within this category.

1.1 The Self as the Only Source of Fantasy

If the self is what creates fantasy, focusing on eliminating the self, rather than only fantasy, is to attempt to solve the problem at its roots. However, suppressing or expelling the cause of fantasy, as the idea of unselfing seems to require, rather than changing it, is only necessary if what causes fantasy necessarily and inevitably engages in fantasy-making, and never issues in truthful perception. Furthermore, even if that were the case, suppression of self may still only be a partial solution, since the possibility is still open that other sources of fantasy exist. External sources of fantasy, however, would have to be elements that the individual was responsible for in order for them to be morally important, for the reasons just given.

¹⁷⁵ See Colman 2009: 365.

¹⁷⁶ Unless we are responsible for the lack of information, and in cases where we have reasons for gathering more. For example, failing to find out more about where one’s food comes from and, in the case of animal-derived food, failing to find out how it was produced, does not count as morally innocent lack of information.

The possibility of other sources of fantasy besides the self has been observed, among others, by Lawrence Blum (2012: 314-6), who laments Murdoch's lack of appreciation of social or cultural sources of perceptual and intellectual distortions. The accusation is not entirely fair, given that one of Murdoch's concerns in relation to the difficulty to attend is about the influence of convention on perception.¹⁷⁷ It is true, however, that the battle for clear perception, even the one against the force of convention, in Murdoch always seems to be fought at the individual level, and Murdoch says little about how to foster forms of attention socially.

However, the idea that the self is the main source of fantasy can be preserved even in combination with the existence of social and cultural distortions, such as stereotypes or conventions, by observing how, for example, their power depends on how deeply they are internalised. In these cases, the self or ego can work ardently to maintain the beliefs acquired, to prevent discomfort or disruption of one's world-view. Even external sources of fantasy, then, can be intimately linked to the working of the ego and to how they are individualised and internalised by the individual. This interrelation is clear, as Blum (2012) himself notes, in the M&D story, where M's perception of D as unpolished and unrefined issues from a conventional understanding of class division and its significance and consequent disregard for the individual case, shaping expectations and offering a readily available and little-examined vocabulary of thick concepts, such as 'vulgar' and 'unrefined'.¹⁷⁸ But these social factors would not have the influence they have, and more specifically they would not so strongly influence perception, if they had not been made part of M's own way of thinking, the abandoning of which requires some sacrifice on the part of her ego (admitting her own mistakes, being open to new interpretations, threatening her self-image, etc.).

While the difference between internal and external sources of fantasy is far from clear cut, there are still distinctions to be made in relation to the degree of control one has over them, and the consequent degree of responsibility: the possibility of changing one's racial prejudice, for example, for a peasant living all her life in a small village in the early 20th Century and who has never interacted

¹⁷⁷ 'One may fail to see the individual ... because we are ourselves sunk in a social whole which we allow uncritically to determine our reactions, or because we see each other exclusively as so determined' ('The Sublime and the Good', EM 216).

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Holland (2012: 260).

with someone from a different country, is different from that of a modern day politician who has a party and a personal interest in maintaining racial prejudice; so is their responsibility different in degree.¹⁷⁹

These observations support the focus on the self as source of fantasy, given the pervasiveness of its role in distorting perception, but they do not settle the question of whether the self is the *only* source of distorted vision. For my present purpose, however, it is not necessary to prove this much. It is sufficient to observe that the self is the most common cause of perceptual and intellectual distortion, and that external causes can also be internalised. It is therefore necessary to eliminate the self's influence in order to achieve clear vision. Moreover, if attention is not only instrumentally valuable but also inherently so, in other words if attention is important not only because it brings about moral perception, but also because in being attentive one needs to exercise virtues, then eliminating the distortions caused by the self is a necessary part of the process of the purification of consciousness which Murdoch connects with virtue.

1.2 The Self Only as Source of Fantasy

Besides the above challenge, what is even more problematic about the notion of unselfing is the first of the two reasons for eliminating the self mentioned earlier, namely that eliminating the self is necessary if the self produces nothing but fantasies. That seems impossible to justify, although it can appear attractive given Murdoch's radically pessimistic view of the self, which leads her, in some passages, to present fantasy not just as something that may arise from the self in certain states, but as something constitutive of the self (here 'psyche'):

The psyche is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself ... It is reluctant to face unpleasant realities. Its consciousness is not normally a transparent glass through which it sees the world but a cloud of more or less fantastic reveries designed to protect the psyche from pain. It constantly seeks consolation, either through imagined inflation of self or through fictions of a theological nature. (SG 76)¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ There are also clear differences in responsibility relating to the consequences of the actions of the two people in the example, but my focus here is on epistemic responsibility, which, while it is closely related to responsibility relation to action and consequences, is nonetheless distinct and comes before it.

¹⁸⁰ The metaphor of transparent glass can be misleading, appearing to suggest that it is desirable for the mind to be a neutral mirror of reality. That, as we shall see below, is the opposite of what Murdoch thinks. The metaphor fits better with Weil's conception, whereby impersonality is the moral goal, and intelligence is the mirror of the necessity of the world (cf. Vetö 1994: 29-30).

This passage can be read as suggesting that the self can *only* produce fantasies; such a claim is deeply problematic: it amounts to the suggestion that we never perceive the world correctly and, more specifically, that attention itself is impossible. If the self were unable to perceive correctly, the idea of moral improvement through attention – which constitutes one of the two main aspects of the moral importance of attention – would lose any sense. Not only would attention be impossible, but there would be, as a consequence, no possibility for the *individual self* to improve morally through increasingly clear understanding and by developing a better ‘quality of consciousness’.¹⁸¹

Instead, at the heart of Murdoch’s thought is the necessity, for morality, of a concept of self as something in which moral improvement and change take place (see for ex. MGM 250): the increasing apprehension of what is real, through attention, leads to an improvement of one’s quality of consciousness, which (according to Murdoch) constitutes the self. The attentive individual is the one whose consciousness is shaped by such repeated acts of attention and who then develops the ability to attend more often, perceiving more widely and more clearly. If the self were to be entirely suppressed, or if it were constitutively unable to perceive clearly, this process of moral improvement would not be possible and the very idea of attention would lose meaning. Since the requirement, in attention, to ‘suppress’, ‘silence’ and ‘expel’ the self cannot refer to the whole of the individual self, what ‘self’ means – in the context of unselfing – has to be something different. The rest of the chapter is devoted to the discussion of this problem. The aim is to account for the positive role of the self, where the self is not only a fantasy maker, while maintaining the necessity to eliminate fantasy created by the self. The discussion will issue in a clarification of the meaning of ‘unselfing’.

2 Unselfing and Impersonality

Attention aims at and enables truthful and clear perception. This also means that what attention reveals must be objectively correct. While correct perception is not achieved outside of a human perspective, as we saw in Chapters 2 and 5, the role of the individual in perception is still under discussion. One way to understand the

¹⁸¹ A similar point is made by Samantha Vice (2007: 65), who observes that since for Murdoch the moral life is a matter of educating the self (or, in the context of my argument, of making the self more attentive and thus more truthful), if the self were only a fantasy mechanism, the attempt to become morally better would not get off the ground.

requirement of objectivity is to conceive of objective perception as free of the subject's influence in perception. In other words, following Murdoch's use of 'self' as 'individual', attention requires the self to be suppressed or expelled, *insofar as* states or specific features of the self (desires, beliefs, emotions, character traits, expectations, etc.) influence perception. If attention refers to perception without the influence of the self, then unselfing can be taken to signify elimination of the self insofar as it influences perception. On this picture, the goal would be an impersonal state of attention.

Conversely, on this model fantasy would be understood as perception or cognition which depends on some state of mind or personal characteristic of the subject: Ada's sexist convictions make her judge women as less capable than men in a job interview; Louise's depression makes everything look dull or hopeless; Carla's relentless optimism makes her believe that things will turn out well when there is no reason to suppose they will. In epistemology, the influence of the subject's states of mind or character traits on perception and cognition is referred to as 'cognitive penetration'. Susanna Siegel proposes to define cognitive penetration (here limited to visual experience, but applicable to other kinds of experience, also beyond perception) in the following way:

If visual experience is cognitively penetrable, then it is nomologically possible for two subjects (or for one subject in different counterfactual circumstances, or at different times) to have visual experiences with different contents while seeing and attending to the same distal stimuli under the same external conditions, as a result of differences in other cognitive (including affective) states. (Siegel 2012: 205-6)¹⁸²

Mental states or features that can penetrate or influence experience include 'moods, beliefs, hypotheses, knowledge, desires, and traits'. Some of these are transitory (moods) and others can be said to be constitutive of the individual self (character traits), but in either case what matters is that the influence comes from the particular self who is perceiving. Cognitive penetration seems to be what takes place in fantasy, when something is understood or perceived in a way which depends on features specific to the subject; while the 'realism' of attention seems to require, conversely, that the subject is transparent to what she is presented with. This conception seems compatible with the overall idea, presented in Chapter 5, of moral perception as apprehension of features which are part of reality, where the concepts used to grasp it need to be tested against the object to which they refer.

¹⁸² Note that the concept of attention employed in the quote is not the same as the present one.

In Siegel's example, Jill has the belief that Jack is angry with her; on subsequently meeting Jack, and seeing his face, she perceives it as an angry face, whereas in other circumstances (without the prior belief that Jack is angry), ex hypothesi, Jill would not see anger in Jack's face. In this example, Jill's belief determines her perception and by doing so leads her to a false or distorted perception (Siegel 2012). Following this line of thought, we can say that if Jill were to be attentive, she would have to give up any element contributed by her particular self to her perception, in this case the prior belief that Jack is angry and that he would be so when she met him, and instead approach Jack by being completely open to observe whatever she is presented with, trying as much as possible not to let her belief play any role. This description refers to an ideal situation: it is unlikely to be completely possible for an individual to approach new situations having entirely shed prior beliefs and generally not allowing any subjective mental state to influence the present perception. This is not a fatal problem, however, because, as we have seen, attention is 'perfectionistic': what is required is to get progressively closer to the ideal, but the attempt is constantly renewed, and so is the measure of success. It follows that the attentive subject is the one who succeeds in progressively minimising the role of the self in perception. In the present case, Jill may remind herself that she believes Jack to be angry, for example, and, knowing that this may be a factor in her perception, be less inclined to credit her initial spontaneous impressions.¹⁸³ Attention seems to require the minimising of cognitive penetration.

An exemplary passage which has been taken to support the idea of the impersonality of attention is the one where Murdoch seems to interrupt the MGM chapter 'Consciousness and Thought – II' to insert three quotations from Rilke about the process of artistic creation, to illustrate, as she calls it, the moral idea of 'pure consciousness' or 'perception without reverie' (one of Weil's definitions of attention).¹⁸⁴ In the passages, attention and unselfing are central. Rilke is praising Cezanne's painting because of its 'animal attentiveness', for watching its subject with the 'attention of a dog' and with 'humble objectiveness', culminating in the

¹⁸³ This example also highlights the importance of self-knowledge for attention, discussed in Chapter 7.

¹⁸⁴ 'Pure consciousness' or 'pure cognition' are the terms used by Zen thinker Katsuki Sekida to refer to consciousness or cognition undistorted by the empirical ego; see the discussion of Sekida's Zen way in MGM 239-50.

prescription of an art that is ‘anonymous’, where even love has been excluded from the painting. The reproach to painters who fall short of excellence is voiced with the words: ‘they painted “I love this” instead of painting “Here it is”’ (MGM 246-7).

As Antonaccio (2000) suggests, one could easily read this passage as advancing the idea that self and reality are opposed to each other, so correct perception is wholly impersonal. This would mean that the unselfing required by truthfulness is an ‘extinction of self’, precisely in the sense of a ‘withdrawal of subjectivity’. Similarly, in her more recent work on Murdoch, Antonaccio concludes:

The sharp distinction drawn here between the artist’s personal or subjective desire (‘I like it’) and the clear vision she struggles to achieve (‘There it is’) suggests that ‘reality’ stands apart from the self as something wholly ‘impersonal.’ It is something that can be grasped only through the withdrawal of subjectivity – that is, through a complete renunciation of desire and an extinction of self. (Antonaccio 2012: 138)¹⁸⁵

On this reading, Rilke’s remarks suggest that subjectivity must be withdrawn in attentive perception, and that unselfing is just such withdrawal or elimination of subjectivity. Attention is impersonal, because the perceiving subject’s individuality does not play a role in the perception of the object.

2.1 Against Impersonality

Although identifying unselfing with the suppression of any contribution of the self to perception seems to be an easy solution, because of the requirement of objectivity for attention, the picture of the perceiving agent that it entails is deeply problematic. If the unselfing required in attention involves the elimination, or rather attempted elimination, of any participation of the individual self in perception, this reduces the role of the attentive self to a mere impersonal spectator. Such a self is a ‘mirror’, reflecting what it perceives without adding anything personal. This self, as subject of perception, looks like an invisible point of pure agency, akin to the subject of existentialist theories, which Murdoch characterises as ‘thin as a needle’ (SG 53). The fact that Murdoch fiercely opposes this notion of self is a first reason for unease

¹⁸⁵ Antonaccio is here referring to a similar passage to the one I quoted above, but from SG: ‘Rilke said of Cezanne that he did not paint “I like it”, he painted “There it is”’ (SG 59). While Antonaccio (2000), in her more recent work, sees this interpretation as capturing one element of Murdoch’s philosophy, in the earlier work from which I have quoted (Antonaccio 2000), she presents it as an interpretation that she considers misleading.

with this account of unselfing. More generally, as pointed out at the start, this suggestion does not square with Murdoch's idea about the moral progress of the individual, which proceeds not by eliminating the self, but rather by achieving a better self through the 'purification of consciousness'. While even the elimination of self requires a self to accomplish it, the goal also does not seem to be what Murdoch suggests for morality.

One answer to this worry would be to maintain that unselfing does refer to the elimination of any role of the particular self in perception, and suggest that this points to a tension within Murdoch's thought. This is the way chosen by Antonaccio (2012b) and Jordan (2008). Antonaccio, while stressing the importance of the individual in attention, takes 'unselfing' to be in tension with those ideas, identifying two currents in Murdoch's thought: one is personal, creative and 'aesthetic', which sees consciousness as engaged in a creative process in relation to reality, disclosing possibilities that are not available from an impersonal perspective or an empirical scientific method; the other, where unselfing is part of a 'saintly' ideal of ascetic self-negation, takes as its ideal an impersonal kind of objectivity where the individual *qua individual* has no role (Antonaccio 2012b: Chapter 6). Similarly, Jordan (2008) holds that one tendency in Murdoch's thought, which includes her view of the ideal or 'highest person', is one where personal elements play no role. Going further than Antonaccio, Jordan suggests that Murdoch 'offers a model where the suppression of the self (i.e., anything personal) is primary. In order to see the "real world", as a consequence, one needs to rid oneself of his or her distinctive personality' (2008: 235). Attention, in other words, is considered, at least partly, an impersonal endeavour.

Contrary to this, I suggest that it is unnecessary to postulate two incompatible strands in Murdoch's thought, and that the notion of unselfing can accommodate a different, not impersonal, interpretation. To interpret unselfing simply as 'elimination of self' fails to appreciate in what specific capacity the subjective element needs to be excluded in attention, unduly extending the exclusion to the perceiving subject in her wholeness. In other words, the misinterpretation arises when 'self' is considered as an indivisible entity.

Let us take the Rilke passage above as an example. Firstly, it would be not only the sign of a different strand in the work, but plainly self-contradictory, for Murdoch to call for the suppression of self in the middle of a chapter advocating

the necessity of the self as continuity of consciousness for morality, and more specifically arguing for the importance of the individual in perception, both in terms of a self with a consciousness which is morally evaluable, and in terms of a self with a consciousness which is morally evaluating. Moreover, in SG Murdoch only uses the word ‘impersonality’ to refer to the ‘scientific’ conception of knowledge and truth she opposes, and similarly in MGM the concept is used mostly with suspicion, with reference to Kant’s philosophy and to characterise Plato’s Forms.¹⁸⁶

Murdoch’s philosophy contains a conception of objectivity and perception which can explain the requirement of unselfing in attention without appealing to impersonality. Murdoch believes that reality is not directly ‘mirrored’ by the human mind, but grasped through the exercise of the imagination, which is inherently evaluative. Each individual has a particular orientation to the Good and resulting understanding of and commitment to values, so that the imagination which presents reality to us is inescapably personal. Concepts, too, which are the tools with which we grasp the world, are evaluative instruments: which concepts we apply, and what we take those concepts to mean, reveal our evaluative grasp of the situation.¹⁸⁷

This does not mean, however, that ‘reality’ equates with each individual’s grasp of it, or that each person can have a set of private concepts. As we saw in Chapter 5, the application of concepts to specific situations is subject to public rules, and the concepts themselves are not made up by the individuals, but learnt publicly with other people, within public contexts of use, in relation to specific objects or situations which are ‘there’ independently of the subject. But concepts, Murdoch argues, are not rigid and finite, but capable of development and ‘deepening’. The understanding of some concepts, like ‘courage’, ‘joy’, ‘repentance’, or ‘human being’, is, on the one hand, something that can be refined and deepened, potentially *ad infinitum* (this is Murdoch’s idea of perfectionism of knowledge and the ‘transcendence’ of reality); on the other, importantly, such process takes place in the context of the individual’s life and experience (SG 25-6), as well as through the

¹⁸⁶ In the case of the Forms, like in Murdoch’s idea of the Good, it is important to note that, while the Forms themselves are impersonal, the effort and desire to reach them is inescapably personal.

¹⁸⁷ Antonaccio (2012b) divides the argument for questioning the ‘ethics of impersonality’ between the idea that morality is an exercise of the imagination and the role of personality in moral perception. While I broadly agree with the content of her argument, I depart from her in two respects: first, I believe that Murdoch’s argument for the personal nature of perception and the role of the imagination are not restricted to what we consider ‘moral’; secondly, the role of personality in moral perception depends in part on the use of the imagination, so the two ideas are better understood together.

individual's faculties, her imagination, her character traits, her ability for empathy, her particular interests, etc.:¹⁸⁸

The idea of 'objective reality', for instance, undergoes important modifications when it is to be understood, not in relation to 'the world described by science', but in relation to the progressive life of a person. (SG 26)¹⁸⁹

This view of cognition and concepts, then, comes with a different view of objectivity, where the world is not the 'impersonal world of facts: the hard objective world' (SG 25), but a world understood and perceived by individuals through their imagination. On this view, there is not one single possible way of understanding or perceiving reality, but several compatible ways, depending on the individual's imaginative faculties. On the other hand, there are also ways of seeing reality which are *not* correct. This model accounts for the necessary limitation of individuals, occupying a particular position and having limited faculties, and for the impossibility of occupying a perspective from nowhere. At the same time, the proposed model does not reject the notion of objectivity, but broadens it to include various compatible individual perspectives, as well as the evaluative process through which reality is apprehended.

What makes the suppression of any contribution of the self in attention appear plausible, then, is not the requirement of objectivity itself, but a particular understanding of objectivity.¹⁹⁰ The interpretation of 'unselfing' as elimination of any personal factor in perception assumes precisely the 'scientific' view of objective knowledge that Murdoch criticises. Only if objective knowledge and correct perception are conceived as being completely independent of the perceiving subject or self is the elimination of the self both possible and desirable. But if Murdoch is correct that the individual is ineliminable in perception and that objectivity and truthfulness in fact involve a personal element, then the unselfing

¹⁸⁸ The balance between public and private is discussed further in the next chapter with reference to Wittgenstein's 'private language argument'.

¹⁸⁹ Murdoch acknowledges that science itself does not necessarily rely on the idea of an impersonal and mind-independent reality that she is attacking: When she calls for 'the liberation of morality, and of philosophy as a study of human nature, from the domination of science', she adds: 'or rather from the domination of inexact ideas of science' (SG 27). Yet often 'science' in Murdoch appears almost like a straw man, useful as a clearly defined counterposition for her argument.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. also SG 32-3 and '... it is perfectly obvious that goodness is connected with knowledge; *not with impersonal quasi-scientific knowledge of the ordinary world*, whatever that may be, but with a refined and honest perception of what is really the case...' (EM 330, emphasis added). See also Antonaccio (2000: 139): 'far from equating realism with the empiricist assumptions of the scientific gaze, Murdoch makes it clear that realism is always keyed to a personal vision ... Yet moral objectivity or realism is not divorced from the perceiving subject; rather, these terms only make sense within the deeply personal field of human moral vision'.

of attention cannot require elimination of the self's contribution to perception. World-revealing attention, in other words, is not impersonal.

Therefore, the individual qualities and faculties of the subject are not a hindrance but an aid to clear perception. To return to the Rilke example, we can see that the necessity not to display one's personality and get 'beyond even love' *within* the painting must be distinguished from the requirement for the artist to perceive (and paint) in an impersonal way, excluding the love she feels for her subjects. As Rilke writes, Cezanne did not *paint* 'I love it', but it was precisely by loving the object (by looking at it with the 'just and loving gaze' of attention) that he was able to communicate it so 'purely', without selfish distortion. 'This consuming of love in anonymous work' (MGM 247) requires the individual's love to be there in the first place, and it is through the consuming of that love that the object is perceived truthfully, so that in the end, in the perceived object, the love, consumed, is not to be seen: 'love becomes invisible (Cordelia), its activities and being are inward' (MGM 247). The subjective element must be absent in what is perceived, absent from what one sees, but it need not (should not) be absent in the process of perception, as an integral part of the perceiving subject. In this sense, subjectivity is a 'tool' of perception, not the result – just like, for example, different people are able to reach the same location on foot, or cycling, or by car, etc.

On this view, the notion of cognitive penetration introduced above, whereby the subject's mental states or character traits influence perception, becomes not only harmless to attention, but a constitutive element of it. This is true, at least, in *some* of its manifestations: just as imagination can become fantasy, and an apparent orientation to the Good can be mistaken and produce false values, so cognitive penetration and the contribution of the subject to perception can lead, as we have seen, to the opposite of clear and objective perception. But there are cases when the subject's contribution can also be essential to knowledge. It is so in the case, to take another example from Siegel, of the moth expert who can, in the same situation, identify moths more easily than the non-expert, because of prior knowledge and expectations. Or, as in the example from Dancy in the previous chapter, the car mechanic can hear the malfunctioning of the water pump thanks to her knowledge, whereas lacking such knowledge the malfunctioning would be identified by a process of inference. Yet more relevant to our discussion, Siegel also mentions the

case of the influence of some character traits, which can aid rather than hinder the pursuit of truth:

In some cases, cognitive penetration can be epistemically beneficial ... If Iris Murdoch and John McDowell are correct in thinking that having the right sort of character lets you see more moral facts than someone lacking that character sees when faced with the same situation, then there too, your perceptual experience becomes epistemically better, thanks to its being penetrated by your character. (Siegel 2012: 201)

‘The right sort of character’ can include virtues such as honesty and humility, which aid truthful understanding. So we can see that perception influenced by the subject does not by itself qualify as fantasy, and unselfing does not amount to elimination of the influence of the self as a contributing factor in perception. Skills, knowledge and virtue are in fact part of the individual’s contribution to correct perception. Particular individual characteristics such as the above also contribute to achieving attention more easily, among which are honesty, selflessness and the ability to focus.

This shows that there is no incompatibility, as Antonaccio (2012b) and Jordan (2008) claim, between the notion of unselfing and the importance of a rich consciousness and of a sense of continuous self for the individual, or between the ‘ascetic’ ideal that Antonaccio identifies in Murdoch and a personal, imaginative understanding of the world. On the contrary, the two are interdependent. While Jordan is correct in claiming that ‘[Murdoch’s] critique of the personal standpoint is oriented toward the goal of ‘seeing the real’, such critique does not involve eliminating the personal perspective, and it certainly does not entail that ‘in order to see the “real world” one needs to rid oneself of his or her distinctive personality, which includes one’s personal loves’ (Jordan 2008: 235). Nor is there a contrast, as Antonaccio and Jordan identify it, between unselfing and the ‘reorientation’ of the self, a change of focus and of objects of concern which Murdoch frequently refers to as the means to moral improvement.¹⁹¹ Once again, the conflict would only exist if unselfing referred to the elimination of any role of the individual subject in correct perception and specifically in attention. But, as we have seen, the individual’s contribution to perception is only harmful in some of its manifestations. Let us now look at what these are and how they come about.

¹⁹¹ See for ex.: ‘Murdoch’s characterisation of the good life here is notably different from her earlier suggestion that it is a reorientation of love toward a worthy object’ (Jordan 2008: 235) and ‘in contrast to the ‘detachment’ and near ‘extinction of self’ noted earlier, these passages [on M&D] suggest on the contrary that good vision has its own *eros*’ (Antonaccio 2000: 140).

3 Unselfing as Suppression of Self-Directed Concern

If unselfing is not the suppression or elimination of the contribution of the individual self to perception and understanding, what is it? Since attention is opposed to fantasy, and since the self is the main creator of fantasy, we still need to understand what it is about the self (what particular way of understanding it, or what activity, or what configuration of it) that is involved in fantasy-making and that disappears if attention is exercised. Observing what it is in the subject's involvement in perception that makes it beneficial rather than damaging to attention, together with the idea of reorientation just introduced and with some of Murdoch's remarks about the nature of the self, can point towards a solution.

3.1 Fantasy as Self-Directed Concern

In defending the importance of the individual self in attention, I have remarked on how certain features or states of the self can be an aid rather than hindrance to correct perception. Evidently not all of the states or qualities of the self contribute positively to correct understanding, as is the case with Jill's belief about Jack's anger, which causes her to misperceive Jack's facial expressions. Among the states or features of the self which do, on the other hand, help to broaden or improve one's perception or understanding, I have mentioned certain cases of expertise (as with the moth expert who can identify moths where another person would see nothing) and virtues (the sympathetic person, for instance, is better able to identify the state of mind of others; patience allows for more details to become visible; love is connected with openness to see and accept what the object of love is really like). These features or states of the self share something which is relevant to attention: the fact that the agent's consciousness, in its focus or concern, is turned to something external; so it appears that the virtues that aid attention are those which make the object most clearly and vividly present to the subject.¹⁹²

For instance, love, as we saw in Ch.4§3, is chief among the virtues or states of mind in being both personal and an occasion for clear vision. 'Pure' love, when devoid of possessiveness, brings about 'a process of unselfing where the lover learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself' (MGM 17). So in the Rilke example above, love is at the same time something personal, specific to the

¹⁹² Cf. Mole (2007: 82-3) for a similar point.

individual, and something that ‘turns’ the individual away from herself to the object, in order to perceive it as it really is. More generally, examples of virtue show that, while the individual self remains an important factor in attention, its positive contribution consists in directing consciousness to something external to itself (let us think of generosity, kindness, humility, etc.)¹⁹³ The more consciousness is absorbed by an external object, the less room for distortion there is.

Therefore, if attention is aided by the self in directing consciousness outward, then what opposes attention, and is eliminated in unselfing, is not the self as such, nor the self as a factor in perception in any of its manifestations, but the self as object of one’s consciousness.¹⁹⁴ This also explains what Murdoch means by the frequent mention of ‘ego-centric’ ‘egotistical’ and ‘selfish’ concern, in her descriptions of ‘bad’, non attentive consciousness: all these terms refer to a *direction* of consciousness, from self back to self, rather than to an inevitable distorting feature of the self. Most of Murdoch’s own examples of attention involve such re-direction away from the self and to something external. The kestrel outside one’s window, a breath-taking mountain landscape, a beautiful work of art are ways to improve or ‘purify’ consciousness because they are catalysts of attention, forcefully directing consciousness away from the self and to something external. So, too, love is considered as a component of attention for its ability to completely turn the individual ‘away’ from herself and focus her entirely on another person, perceiving them more truthfully.

This way of understanding the self in attention also fits with another element of Murdoch’s conception of the self. In SG the self is described not in static terms, as an entity, but as a ‘system of energy’ (SG 54), a complex of attachments or states of mind always directed to some object. If the self is such a ‘system’, then it is not inherently bad or good. What makes the self good or bad, in this picture, depends on its objects. Part of what makes an object of consciousness good is that it captures or encourages attention (like art and nature), rather than being conducive to self-

¹⁹³ An objection to this point can be that, for Aristotle, there are virtues which are ‘self-regarding’. While Murdoch talks of virtue, she does not mention Aristotle, and holds that the best virtue is love, which is not part of Aristotle’s list. Love is also a primarily other-regarding virtue. One answer to this objection, then, can be that Murdoch has particular virtues in mind. Another possible answer is to suggest that self-regarding virtues can be considered not merely virtues of concern for the self, but virtues in which self-concern is also necessary for the well-being of the community and generally other people.

¹⁹⁴ The distinction between self as agent and self as object is also found in Vice (2007: 61).

involved fantasy (like ‘bad’ art, which shows things as we would like them to be). This means that the quality of what one is concerned with is directly related to one’s ability to attend.

Speaking of attention (or lack thereof) as ‘direction of *consciousness*’ is suitably broad, encompassing all of the subject’s faculties, including intellectual observation, emotional participation, imaginative engagement (cf. Ch.3§3.2). The self naturally directs consciousness back to itself, because it is the source of desires and because of our natural interest in ourselves. Because of the interested and desiring quality of the self, and because desire, understood broadly, is the main factor in the direction of consciousness, the direction of consciousness towards the self can also be called a ‘direction of concern’. Fantasy arises when consciousness is turned to the self, but this does not refer to a purely intellectual contemplation of the self, but rather to an engagement and concern with it. Simone Weil expresses this idea by claiming that giving up self-centredness has to be done ‘not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of our soul’; it is that act of the whole person, including her concerns and desires, that enables her, in attention, ‘to awaken to what is real and external’ (WG 115).

If Murdoch, following Freud, is right to claim that the self is its own natural object of concern, this means that the individual takes herself to be of special importance. Simone Weil observes, before Murdoch, the nature of this self-centred tendency and its moral (as well as metaphysical) aspect. Like Murdoch, Weil thinks that it is a fact that the self tends forcefully towards self-concern and that this goes against truthful perception. In the following, Weilian scholar Miklós Vető presents a clear and condensed exposition of Weil’s idea of the self, its de-realising and morally dangerous tendencies, and its relation to attention:

The whole sphere of the self is maintained by a centripetal force greedily sucking in reality, and the more one nears the centre, the more powerful is the force. However, the centre is nothing in itself; it is only aspiration. The self is a violent contraction paralysing and crushing the beings and things it encounters. Such an attitude serves the purpose of destroying the world, leaving there a trace of the self; it never helps us to understand the world. Even at the most simple level, the faculty of attention is the opposite of a contraction. (Vető 1994: 42; cf. WG 111)¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁵ Murdoch figures prominently in the acknowledgments of the book which, the author writes, ‘took shape under the sympathetic eye of Iris Murdoch’ (Vető 1994: xi); we can then perhaps assume that Vető’s interpretation is not at odds with Murdoch’s own understanding of Weil.

Weil thinks that the natural tendency of each individual is to imagine herself to be, metaphysically and morally, at the centre of the universe. Her explanation for the inherent egocentricity of humankind is that the individual, perceiving herself to be at the centre of space and time, believes herself also to be a moral and metaphysical centre. The passage also points at the reasons why this self-centredness is at the same time a source of fantasy.

Firstly, there is a distortion *about the self*, about the place that one occupies in the world: instead of conceiving of oneself as occupying a point like any other in the universe, the individual lives and thinks as if she were at the centre, inflating her own importance and taking her point of view to have special relevance. The sense of centrality of the self leaves little room for anything else to truly matter. Secondly, distortion *about the world* follows from this: if self is taken to be central, the external world will be in a sense unseen, given that self fills the majority of the field of vision. The self can be, and naturally is, so inflated that all it sees is itself, even reflected in the world. This is why Weil claims that the self is the negation of the other (N 213), and that the self's 'violent contraction' can only 'crush' what it encounters.¹⁹⁶ This self-concerned illusion of centrality, and the relative inability to fully appreciate the independent existence of other things and people as they are, is for Weil at the root of crimes against other beings: 'if murderers knew their victims really existed, they would not be able to thrust their knives into them. Not to see obstacles is the terrible secret of the carnage of the victorious warrior, and of the misdeed of the criminal' (Vetö 1994: 21; cf. NB 109). This thought highlights, negatively, the relevance of the motivational internalism observed in the previous chapter: just as clear perception of, for instance, another human being, makes certain actions impossible because they violate what the other is, so lack of such perception makes anything possible. Like Murdoch, Weil believes that evil is not so much an effect of ill will, nor a deliberate choice, but rather an inability to see correctly, whereby reality is obscured by the self or ego – a lack of attention. Only those who do not recognise that others are autonomous beings like themselves can commit certain actions against them, 'because their victims become shadows for

¹⁹⁶ Weil characterises this state as the illusion of being God, whose presence fills everything leaving no room for anything else. So, like God had to withdraw to allow the world to exist in creation, Weil indicates that the right thing to do for human beings, who live in the illusion of centrality, is to withdraw, to destroy the part of themselves that constantly leads back to the self, obscuring the real. This is unselfing.

them' (NB 109). Murdoch expresses the same idea in SG: 'The more the separateness and differentness of other people is realised, and the fact that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one's own, the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing' (SG 66). Achieving clear perception through attention is, therefore, the first imperative.

3.1.1 Direct Self-Concern

Self-directed concern, or 'self-concern' for brevity, can take various forms, predominantly divisible into two kinds: it can take the world as its explicit object, while distorting it or obliterating parts of it out of self-concern (as in projections of one's fears, or in obsessions for particular objects); or it can appear in conscious and explicit form, where the individual disregards aspects of reality or other people out of explicit concern for herself. I consider the latter kind first.

In such cases, there is little interest in the world in its own right and little desire to do justice to things as they are, as long as they do not relate to the subject. A striking example of this is provided by Katherine Mansfield's description of the experience of an egotistical artist in a café in Paris; the protagonist, brooding upon his ambitions and his situation, happens to read a sentence which gives him an intense aesthetic experience. The sentence itself is of little value, and even the experience it occasions is not objectively interesting to the protagonist; its value lies in the self-gratifying interpretation that it makes possible:

But then, quite suddenly, at the bottom of the page, written in green ink, I fell on to that stupid, stale little phrase: *Je ne parle pas français*.

There! It had come – the moment – the *geste*! And although I was so ready, it caught me, it tumbled me over; I was simply overwhelmed. And the physical feeling was so curious, so particular ... But, ah! The agony of that moment! How can I describe it? I didn't think of anything. I didn't even cry out to myself. Just for one moment I was not. I was Agony, Agony, Agony.

Then it passed, and the very second after I was thinking: 'Good God! Am I capable of feeling as strongly as that? But I was absolutely unconscious! I hadn't a phrase to meet it with! I was overcome! I was swept off my feet! I didn't even try, in the dimmest way, to put it down!'

And up I puffed and puffed, blowing off finally with: 'After all I must be first-rate. No second-rate mind could have experienced such an intensity of feeling so . . . purely. (Mansfield 1953: 87-8)

The object of experience is not only refracted through the self, but it is entirely dependent on the gratification of the self.¹⁹⁷ The story brings to life Murdoch's remarks that 'self is such a dazzling object that if one looks *there* one may see

¹⁹⁷ Note, ironically, the mention of self-extinction in the text.

nothing else' (SG 31), in contrast to an actual experience of beauty, where the self would recede to contemplate the independent existence of something external and real.

3.1.2 Indirect Self-Concern

More often, the self distorts perception in more subtle ways. In many cases, the world is the apparent object of one's concern, but self-concern distorts it to suit the self's wants and needs, primarily by projecting the self and its desires onto it. These cases are not clearly distinct from the first kind. In both, the self is its own object of concern and occupies, more or less explicitly, the subject's field of perception. Most of the time, however, distortion and obliteration take place covertly and not consciously, making them more difficult to counter. Both Murdoch and Weil observe this, and both stress how surreptitiously self-gratification born of self-centredness can manifest itself, even in apparent cases of selflessness.

These cases include what Antonaccio (2012b) has defined as 'paradoxes of *askesis*', where the practises aimed at moral purification turn out to be corrupting. Specifically, 'the very attempt to overcome one's ego may itself become a form of egoism in another guise' (2012b: 164). One form the paradox can take is moral hubris, where the individual feels pride at the thought that she has been able to overcome her ego. Similar to this, but not identical, are cases when moral reflection aimed at truth and goodness becomes entangled in self-interest. So, for instance, Weil warns how easily 'affliction', which is potentially a way to unself by realising one's own nothingness, is transformed into 'mere' suffering, which is full of consolatory illusions.¹⁹⁸ In a different context, serious reflection upon the morality of one's actions can, in a matter of seconds, tilt over into excessive interest in oneself, while the situation being considered, the true object of attention, becomes secondary to the morality of one's own behaviour.¹⁹⁹ Or, as Bernard Williams

¹⁹⁸ Murdoch comments: 'we console ourselves with fantasies ... instead ... we must hold on to what has really happened' (MGM 503).

¹⁹⁹ For instance: a friend asks for help looking after their children for an afternoon. You have a previous engagement and refuse. Afterwards you realise the friend's need for help was more important than keeping the engagement. You spend some time wondering why you did otherwise and what features of your personality got in the way of understanding the appropriate thing to do. This may seem morally commendable and appropriately self-critical. Yet all the while, worries about your moral character overshadow considerations about the difficulty the friend had to face because of your actions. This is an example of what Murdoch means by remarking that 'one's self is interesting, so one's motives are interesting, and the unworthiness of one's motives is interesting' (SG 68).

(1981a) has observed, the refusal to perform a particular action because it is morally wrong, while knowing that if we don't do it, it will be performed by someone else, can be a matter of 'moral self-indulgence'. Philosophical theories themselves, according to Murdoch, with their 'calming orderliness', or even the formal unity of stories and art, can function as self-protective and illusory consolation in the human search for order and meaning in life.

The second paradox of *askesis* that Antonaccio considers is 'self deception', where one overestimates one's ability to renounce selfishness, and then is humiliated when failing to live up to the task. These cases serve to illustrate how, even in scenarios of genuine moral effort, fantasy generated out of self-directed concern is extremely widespread, in more or less subtle ways, making attention both so rare and so difficult: 'we are not used to looking at the real world at all' (EM 352).

A famous story of romantic illusion can serve as an extreme example of the self-centred fantasy that is the opposite of attention, and that operates in various degrees in virtually everybody. Flaubert's character Madame Bovary has become the epitome of the daydreamer, whose fantasies lead to destructive actions and a tragic end.²⁰⁰ By living in a dream world motivated by self-gratification, Emma Bovary embodies lack of attention and corresponding distortion of reality, a failure to do justice to things and people around her.²⁰¹ Although apparently concerned with her surroundings and desperately attached to her lover, Emma only wishes for things to be different from what they are, in order to conform to the idealised life she has constructed for herself out of reading sentimental novels.²⁰² Differently from the previous example from Mansfield, Emma is not overtly thinking only about herself, yet her perceptions are in the same way determined by her attempts to gratify her self by picturing a reality which satisfies her romantic ideals. Uninterested in 'the great and surprising variety of the world' (SG 66) discoverable

²⁰⁰ Andrea Dworkin also notes the connection with Murdoch's idea of fantasy as morally problematic in her reading of *Madame Bovary* (1987: 134).

²⁰¹ Turning a stale metaphor into a real practise, it is said that Flaubert took inspiration in writing *Madame Bovary* by looking at landscapes through pieces of coloured glass (Sodré 1999: 52).

²⁰² The negative influence of bad literature is not, I believe, the central question here. Emma does tend to read poor quality books (i.e. books that lack imagination and realism, aimed at satisfying specific desires in the readers, themselves lacking in the moral quality of attention to reality on the part of the authors), but even more important is the attitude of the reader, who only focuses on what gratifies her in the fiction and fails to learn what she could from it; the books are not read attentively but, as Ignès Sodré notes (1999: 50) they are themselves props for her fantasies.

through attention, Emma indulges in daydreams which are dull and repetitive, lacking in imagination, because entirely geared towards satisfying the same unfulfilled desires. Even the men she claims to love are nothing but tools in fulfilling her romantic longings, something which is evident from her preference for daydreaming about her lover Rodolphe rather than spending time with him.

In psychoanalytic terminology, Murdochian fantasy, i.e. fantasy born out of self-defence, is called a 'defence mechanism'.²⁰³ In a psychoanalytic reading of *Madame Bovary*, Ignès Sodr  explains how Emma's daydreams are defence mechanisms aiming 'to cure empty and depressed states of mind' and thus represent an avoidance of reality (Sodr  1999: 49). Murdoch also often turns to psychoanalytic language to describe the interference of the self in correct perception. One of the main obstacles to attention that Murdoch identifies is 'neurosis', a concept she derives from Freud but which she also seems to employ rather loosely to refer to anxious and egoistic states of mind.²⁰⁴ For Murdoch, in neurosis 'we may fail to see the individual because we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own into which we try to draw things from outside, not grasping their reality and independence, making them into dream objects of our own' (EM 216).

While it may be easy to recognise these distorting operations of the self in Flaubert's heroine, it may be less straightforward to spot them in the smaller details of our lives, and especially in ourselves. The M&D example in SG provides a more low-key instance of a self-centred concern that distorts reality: protectiveness of her son and attachment to class prejudice inform M's perception so that, for instance, she can continue to think that her son is superior to his wife and that he really belongs to his mother, or so that she does not need to disrupt her self-image by

²⁰³ The theory of defence mechanisms was developed by Anna Freud (1992). She identifies the following: repression, regression, reaction formation, isolation, undoing, projection, introjection, turning against one's own person, reversal, sublimation or displacement. All these are opposites of attention.

²⁰⁴ Margaret Holland (2012) explores Murdoch's conception of neurosis, noting how for Freud fantasy serves as compensation and protection for the psyche (See Freud 1924). Holland also refers to David Shapiro (1965), who explains how in some kinds of obsessive-compulsive neurosis the element of avoidance of reality is motivated by a conservative anxiety to avoid novelty, surprise or anything that may not chime with the world-view of the subject. Similarly to what Murdoch often remarks in relation to the self as anxious creator of familiar and false unities, the neurotic person rejects uncertainties and is 'actively inattentive' to new ideas. This is the exact opposite of the 'empty', open and receptive attitude of the attentive subject as described by Weil and Murdoch, where the ability to be unsettled and surprised is essential.

admitting her prejudices about social hierarchy. Murdoch's observations about the difficulty of attention are aimed at making the reader reflect on how easily and forcefully egoistic concerns drive not only action but perception too: 'the ego is indeed unbridled. Continuous control is required' (MGM 260).

3.2 The Invisible Self

If it is the tendency to be concerned with the self that generates fantasy and opposes attention, then the concept of unselfing can indeed be understood as the vanishing or elimination of the self, but in a different and more limited sense: not as the self *tout court*, as perceiving subject or as individual consciousness, but as the self *as an object of focus or concern to itself*. If we take the perspective of the individual who is trying to improve herself morally and to attend, her task of unselfing takes the form of being concerned with, and thus attentive to, objects outside of the self. There is, in this sense, no self to be seen or perceived for the attentive subject. In other words, unselfing requires the vanishing of the self from the field of vision. This makes sense of some of Murdoch's rather obscure formulations, such as that 'goodness is connected with the attempt to *see* the unself' (SG 93, emphasis added): goodness means to see, rather than to be, no self. And it makes sense of the requirement, not that we should have no 'I', but that in unselfing 'we should have *no idea* of an I': not that self should vanish, but that in attention the 'mind is ... emptied of self' (MGM 245).

Another way of formulating the same idea would be to say that something about the self has to be eliminated, and that something is the 'mechanism' or configuration of the self that plays the role of satisfying the self's demands. This is what Murdoch calls 'ego'.²⁰⁵ Indeed, although her usage is not consistent, it is the ego, more often than the self, which is accused of being 'the enemy' of the moral life and which she urges should be destroyed or suppressed. The ego is a part of the self, or rather the name of a specific direction of the self's concern: it is the 'centripetal force' that continuously works to sustain the illusion of centrality and

²⁰⁵ Despite the fact that Murdoch is strongly influenced by Freud in her psychology, her concept of 'ego' differs from Freud's in some important respects. For Freud, the ego does more than protect itself by fantasising. It mediates between the demands of the id, the superego and the world. Often the ego prioritises the reality principle, which means that in fact it has a positive role in relation to the perception of the world, silencing the demands of the id in favour of reality (Freud 1923: 12-66). In short, Freud's conception shares with Murdoch's the idea that the ego has the primary task of looking after the self, but not the fact that it always or mostly creates distortions.

that fabricates fantasies in order to project itself outward and satisfy its own demands.²⁰⁶ If the ‘un-’ of unselfing referred to the elimination of some unit, then it would be more correct to talk of ‘unegoing’.

Having identified the task of unselfing with the suppression of self-directed concern, a last cautionary consideration seems in order. While attention represents the aim of the individual in search of goodness, it is, as we have seen, a perfectionist concept, whereby the state of perfect attention is never achieved, but constant improvements are possible and indeed achievable through effort and practise (as well as ‘luck’ in having a virtuous attentive temperament). Therefore, although attention can appear to be unbearably demanding, it also accounts for the fact that it will inevitably fall short of the ideal, and mould itself to the limitations of human individuals and human life. It is to signal this point that Murdoch frequently remarks on the sheer difficulty of pursuing a good life. It is not possible to be either constantly or perfectly attentive, avoiding all fantasy and therefore all reality-distorting defence mechanisms.²⁰⁷ In fact a few fantasies (as Freud makes clear) may be necessary to a healthy human life.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ An interesting difference between Weil and Murdoch is that for Weil ‘imagination’ is a faculty generating illusions. For Weil, it is through imagination that we fancy ourselves the moral and metaphysical centre of the universe. Imagination fills the void and rushes to supply the self with lies, *when the self is threatened by reality* (see NB 199). While the use of words is different, it seems that with ‘imagination’ Weil means exactly what Murdoch means by ‘fantasy’.

²⁰⁷ Moreover, not all defence mechanisms result in fantasy about the external world: in many cases what is perceived in a distorted manner are one’s desires or drives in relation to the world, not the world itself.

²⁰⁸ Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* (2004) provides two complex examples of a difficulty or inability to attend which may be necessary both for the individual’s sanity and for their morality. In ‘The Problem of Evil’, the protagonist finds herself horrified by and yet drawn into a novel describing in detail the hanging the group of men who conspired against Hitler. The portrayal of extreme cruelty, indeed of evil, makes Elizabeth wonder whether, contrary to what she used to think and to liberal discourse, it may not be morally wrong for evil to be described and offered to the public’s attention. These thoughts echo and seem to oppose the passages in another chapter of the book, ‘The Philosophers and the Animals’, where Costello introduces the case of the villagers who lived near Treblinka and who went on with their lives ignoring the smoke coming from the camp, avoiding to think about what may be happening there. The villagers were probably aware of the horrors of Treblinka, but refused to admit or think about them, *denied* them, or in Coetzee’s words they ‘knew and yet didn’t know’ about what was being done to other human beings at a short distance from them: ‘The people who lived in the countryside around Treblinka ... said that, while in a sense they might have known, in another sense they did not know, could not afford to know, for their own sake’ (Coetzee 2004: 63-4). They could not *afford* to know. The suggestion is that knowledge of evil can damage the psyche to such extent that sanity requires the suppression of attention in such cases. This is exactly what Costello claims for herself and as a general requirement in the case of the description of Hitler’s hangman. Knowledge of evil can be dangerous, in the first case, because it manifests the possibility of certain actions; as Weil writes, ‘even to dwell in imagination on certain things as possible ... is to commit ourselves to them already’ (GG 77); on the other, presumably, because it can demolish one’s faith in humanity and thus in one’s ability to be good.

Conclusions

With these qualifications in mind, whether unselfing is understood as eliminating the ego, or as eliminating the self from one's field of vision, what has to be given up in attention, as Murdoch and Weil suggest, is an 'illusory position', that of centrality, fostered by a misdirection of the self's psychic energy (a 'contraction' on itself). This means that unselfing is more akin to dispelling an illusion than to eliminating something real. On Murdoch's understanding, the ego is not a necessary part of the individual, only a particular, albeit completely natural and very strong, tendency of the self, and can therefore be suppressed or eliminated without eliminating the individual self. The self, as a psychological unity and continuity of consciousness, is not an illusion, but it gives rise to illusions when, doubled back on itself, it becomes 'ego'. As Weil puts it, 'the ego is only the shadow projected by sin and error which blocks God's light and which I take for a being' (N 419).²⁰⁹ In Weil, as in Murdoch, unselfing appears as a negation, not of the individuality of the person, but of the obsessive self-concern that causes the subject to perceive the world through the filter of the self's demands and desires.²¹⁰

While the self as subject can contribute positively to correct perception and thus to attention, the direction of concern back onto the self generates fantasy. If self-concern generates fantasy, and attention is the attempt to perceive correctly (by definition, without fantasy), then it is constitutive of attention that the individual's concern be directed outward, i.e. not to the self. Murdoch's claim that 'the direction of attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from self' (SG 66), echoed by Weil's statement that 'attention must always be directed toward the object ... never toward the self' (N 128), becomes understandable if what goes against attention is

²⁰⁹ As an aside, we can note an interesting similarity between unselfing or *décreation* and the Buddhist notion of *anatta* or not-self, which culminates in Nirvana, where the substantial self faces extinction by being recognised as nothing. In Buddhist studies, too, there is a debate on whether *anatta* is to be understood as total extinction of self, or as extinction of the illusory notion of self considered as a permanent reified entity, while keeping the notion of empirical self or mind-continuity (*citta-saṃtāna*) (see Rahula 1962, Ch.6). While in Murdoch the concept of self is more substantial than in Buddhism, the requirement to unself, as well as the practises of attention and mindfulness involves, are strikingly similar.

²¹⁰ This solution, however, cannot be uncontroversially attributed to Weil. There is in her thought another strand which seems to support a different conception of unselfing, more akin to the total annihilation of self considered above ('the only way to truth is through one's own annihilation', HP 27). The conception of creation by which God withdraws also supports the idea that the individual creature should become as close to nothing as possible, so that God can be manifest again, filling the space that the creature (the self) was taking up as result of creation. Thus the very fact of existing implies the absence of God and sin: 'That which is creation from the point of view of God is sin from the point of view of the creature' (FLN 211).

not the self as perceiving subject, but the direction of concern of the subject to the self.

Unselfing, then, means eliminating the self insofar as it is an object of concern for the subject, or eliminating the ego understood as such a mechanism. On this understanding, unselfing refers to a direction of focus and concern, rather than an active suppression of something. If self-concern is eliminated precisely by directing one's concern to something external, then the effort to unself is not primarily a negative one, but it is an effort to be focused on and concerned with reality.²¹¹

Antonaccio offers a similar comment, after referring to Murdoch's example of consciousness being drawn away from selfish preoccupations by the sudden appearance of a kestrel outside the window:

In the precise moment that one attends to the kestrel, 'self' (i.e., brooding, self-absorbed, hurt vanity) vanishes from consciousness. This movement is 'automatic': attention to the new object is *at one and the same time* an extinction or suppression of self, since 'seeing' redirects psychic energy from self to kestrel. (Antonaccio 2000: 135-6, emphasis added)²¹²

As Weil would put it, giving up one's imaginary position at the centre already is attending, because giving up self-centredness means turning towards the outside.²¹³ It follows that attention (which also includes *eros*) and unselfing are two sides of the same coin. When attention is in place, concern is turned to reality and the self is not part of one's vision; conversely, when preoccupied with the self, the subject is not attending. This is precisely what Murdoch indicates in one of the quotes at the start of this chapter, which now becomes more understandable: 'the realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of self' (SG 66). Self-centred concern, being the source of fantasy, cannot coexist with

²¹¹ A similar suggestion is made by Holland (2012) in relation to moral freedom, where the 'negative freedom' of being liberated from fantasy is primarily geared at enabling the 'positive freedom' of attending to reality.

²¹² As far as this claim goes, I agree with Antonaccio. However, right after these observations she introduces her trademark 'reflexive' movement back to the self, whereby the purified consciousness is able to see the self more clearly (Antonaccio 2000: 136). In the context of Murdoch's attention, this second movement appears both unnecessary and potentially dangerous. (See Ch.7 on the dangers of self-reflection).

²¹³ Vetö: 'attention is ... an operation making us turn toward the outside *while* emptying our mind of the self's own goals' (Vetö 1994: 43, emphasis added) and Weil: 'we live in a world of unreality and dreams. To give up our imaginary position at the centre, to renounce it, not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of our soul, that means to awaken to what is real and external, to see the true light and hear the true silence' (WG 115).

attention, which on the contrary enables us to perceive reality. Fantasies are dispelled, not by focusing on them and trying to suppress them (hence, also, Murdoch's suspicion of psycho-analysis), but rather by attending.²¹⁴ Attention is about seeing the truth, and contemplating truth means not contemplating one's desires and demands on the world (yet this, as we shall see in the next Chapter, does not prevent the possibility of self-knowledge). Unselfishness, objectivity, and realism come together in the concept of attention.

The analysis of unselfing has provided a way to account for the role, in achieving correct perception, not just of the imaginative and evaluative faculties of the mind, explored in the previous chapters, but also of the way in which these faculties are manifested in the individual self. Attention, therefore, emerges as a personal endeavour geared at perceiving an objective reality. It now remains to account for something that has been implicitly important all along, i.e. the self-knowledge that appears to be necessary in order to identify the self-concerned fantasies which need to be eliminated. In the following chapter, therefore, I shall consider how self-knowledge can be accommodated in the framework so far delineated, and particularly within the account of unselfing offered here.

²¹⁴ This is another point of close similarity with Buddhist meditation practises.

Chapter 7

Attention and Self-Knowledge

Introduction

The importance of attention in Murdoch's ethics depends on the ability of the attentive subject to see the world clearly and justly, by eliminating distortions coming from the self. In the previous chapter I argued that it is neither necessary nor consistent with Murdoch's thought that distortions coming from the self should be avoided by adopting an impersonal stance, whereby attention reveals facts entirely independent of the observer. Instead, I proposed that we understand the unselfing which is part of attention as the elimination not of the self but of self-directed focus or concern. The self can contribute either positively to attention, through virtues, experience, knowledge, etc. or negatively, through self-concern, which is the cause of self-gratifying fantasy. It is only the latter that needs to be eliminated through unselfing.

If the self interferes with attention only when it is concerned with itself, then, unselfing means turning focus and concern away from the self and onto the world. 'Looking outward' allows the individual to contribute to correct perception while avoiding the distorting influence of the self, which comes about when the self becomes the object of one's consciousness. In this way, the account I suggest makes room for the moral aspect of consciousness and the consequent importance of the subject in perception, while at the same time and without tension eliminates the distorting aspect of the self which leads to fantasy and lack of attention.

While this view makes sense of the great importance that Murdoch places on individuality in the moral life, the characterisation of attention (and thus of unselfing) as involving a direction of focus 'outward, away from the self' (SG 66), suffers both from certain difficulties in relation to general moral concerns, and from tensions internal both to the conception of attention and to Murdoch's philosophy. The main difficulty involves accounting for the role of the self in morality in those instances where a certain degree of self-directedness appears to be either necessary or beneficial to moral understanding. The above account risks denying any role to self-knowledge in morality, and indeed risks prohibiting it, insofar as self-knowledge seems to require the direction of focus onto the self. Far from the

Socratic ‘know thyself’, a view of morality that revolves around attention appears to make the imperative to know oneself morally problematic. Yet the importance of self-knowledge is supported, on the one hand, by Murdoch’s explicit and sustained defence of a substantial and observable inner life; and on the other, it is required by the very accounts of attention and unselfing: knowing when the self is contributing to clear perception, and where conversely the self is distorting ‘vision’ by directing concern back to itself, requires the possession of some kind of self-knowledge. In other words, in order to attend properly to what is outer one needs to know whether one’s self is interfering with the task – whether for instance one is being biased, anxious, or careless, etc.

The concern to eliminate any focus on the self, however, makes self-knowledge problematic only if it is assumed that it can only be acquired by directing one’s focus inward, i.e. through introspection. For Murdoch, knowing the self equates to a large extent to knowing the inner life.²¹⁵ While Murdoch explicitly rejects the Cartesian view of the self, some of the ideas she presents appear to be flirting with the idea of introspection, as we shall see.

A model of self-knowledge that might accommodate the prohibition of focusing on the self is behaviourism. According to this theory, knowledge about an individual’s inner states can be obtained by observing her behaviour. Self-knowledge, then, can be obtained by observing one’s own behaviour, by seeing oneself ‘from the outside’, as an object of observation among others. No special relationship to oneself is involved, and no self-directed focus or concern either. In this case, too, however, although some of Murdoch’s remarks can be taken to support such a model (‘the good (better) man is liberated from selfish fantasy, can see himself as others see him’, MGM 331) in MGM she argues at length against behaviourism.

Neither introspection nor behaviourism, therefore, seems to fit Murdoch’s philosophy or the concept of attention. While behaviourism denies the importance of a ‘private’ inner life that does not issue in behaviour, which Murdoch forcibly

²¹⁵ Although self and inner life are not identical, in MGM Murdoch discusses both concepts together (where the inner life is also called ‘consciousness’) as the ‘fundamental mode of being’ of the individual; the self is defined as ‘the place where we live’ (SG 93), and consciousness is ‘that place, where we are at home’ (MGM 260). Consciousness is also called ‘self-being’, or the mode of being of the self. So it seems safe to assume that, according to Murdoch, understanding one’s inner life also amounts understanding something about the self, and that self-knowledge can be obtained through knowledge of one’s inner life or consciousness.

defends, introspection involves a direction of consciousness that is contrary to the one operating in attention. In what follows, I examine Murdoch's engagement with introspection and behaviourism. It will turn out that neither model of self-knowledge is adequate for her purposes and, as a result, a third possibility is offered, drawing on the philosophy of Wittgenstein.

1 What Is Wrong with the Self?

Two attempts at resolving the tension between the outward focus of attention and the importance of self-knowledge have been made by Samantha Vice (2007) and Christopher Mole (2007). Vice reads Murdoch as having a limited view of the self (as merely a centre of egoistic – and thus illusory – desires), so that a different account of the self can make room for self-understanding, which in turn is required for attention. In the previous chapter, I have given reasons against taking Murdoch's concept of the self in such a way. Mole's suggestion, instead, is not that thinking about the self is in fact permissible, but to reject the introspection model by pointing out that the 'morally important states of mind', which he equates with character traits, are not to be understood as 'inner occurrences' at all; therefore, understanding one's states of mind, as required for attention, does not involve self-directed focus.²¹⁶ Self-knowledge, according to Mole, is rather to be conceived of as a relation, where self-knowledge is achieved by reflecting on the object of one's states of mind. My discussion, to anticipate, will reach the same kind of conclusion. Differently from Mole, however, this chapter engages with self-knowledge more generally, rather than limited exclusively to character traits, because any information about the self is *potentially* helpful in attention, so states of mind cannot, in principle, be divided between those that are 'morally important' and those that are not. Secondly, I shall offer a more detailed exploration of how to understand self-knowledge in terms of looking outward.

Let us start by briefly recapitulating those ideas presented in Chapter 6 which are relevant for the present argument. As we saw, Murdoch's warning against self-directed concern derives from her ideas about fantasy as being both a form and a cause of moral failure, and about the self as being the primary source of fantasy.

²¹⁶ Mole (2007) includes character traits in the notion of states of mind. His account takes attention as a virtue, and claims that self-understanding is necessary for virtue: to know if we are acting as the virtuous agent would we need to know our states of mind (which aspects of our character we're exercising).

Human beings, in her view, are ‘naturally selfish’ and the tendency of every individual is toward self-gratification, which, in turn, involves the creation of *fantasies*, since ‘consciousness is ... a cloud or more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain. It constantly seeks consolation, either through imagined inflation of self or through fictions of a theological nature’ (SG 76). As a consequence, the direction of attention ‘away from self’ is, instead, ‘contrary to nature’, yet it is also the path to moral improvement: ‘what counteracts the system’, i.e. the self’s tendency to fantasise, is ‘attention to reality’ (SG 67). If self and reality stand at opposite ends of the moral spectrum, then it would appear that goodness is achieved through suppression of self. Yet, as concluded in Chapter 6, what is to be suppressed cannot be the self qua subject or perceiver, or there would be no virtuous states of mind and no moral improvement. What needs to be avoided is, rather, the self’s natural tendency towards self-directedness: what generates fantasies, and is therefore morally corrupting, is not the self as a whole, but the self when focused on itself (‘ego’) as opposed to the external world.

On this model, self-knowledge acquired by looking inward or introspecting would be part of such fantasy-making self-directedness, and must therefore be avoided. One solution to the tension between introspection and attention is to claim that introspection is not conducive to distortion or fantasy. Murdoch’s moral psychology does not support this possibility. For Murdoch, the self is *extremely difficult* (almost impossible) to see clearly, for various reasons. The general reason is that the self has a natural tendency to create fantasies. This is apparent in two ways: firstly, we are very much interested in our selves, so that we may forget about the relevance of other things: ‘the self is such a dazzling object that if one looks there one may see nothing else’ (SG 31); secondly, and importantly, the self can get in the way of clear perception even when one is not consciously thinking about oneself at all. In these cases, the self acts as a distorting filter in the subject’s thoughts and perceptions. When, for instance, in the story of the mother in law (SG 17-23), M looks at D and sees her as juvenile, she is also, at the same time, allowing her own snobbishness to become part of her perception; when she is thinking of her son as having married beneath himself, her jealousy is also part of the picture. This kind of activity of the self, rather than its overt musings about itself, is what Murdoch most often focuses on as the antagonist of morality.

These are some of the reasons behind Murdoch's claim that goodness involves focusing outward, that is, attending. Introspection, for Murdoch, even when moved by honest desire to understand oneself truthfully, rarely yields knowledge, and on the contrary is likely to foster illusions, not only about the world, but also about the self:

In such a picture sincerity and self-knowledge, those popular merits, seem less important. It is an attachment to what lies outside the fantasy mechanism, and not a scrutiny of the mechanism itself, that liberates. Close scrutiny often merely strengthens its power. 'Self-knowledge', in the sense of a minute understanding of one's own machinery, seems to me, except at a fairly simple level, usually a delusion. (SG 67)

Close scrutiny of the self, according to Murdoch, not only does not issue in knowledge about the self, but also strengthens its fantasy-making, derealising power. A similar thought, unsurprisingly, can be found in Simone Weil, who also spells out her reasons for that claim:

Introspection is a particular psychological state, incompatible with other psychological states.

1. With thinking about the world ...
2. With action, at least with voluntary action ...
3. With a very strong emotion ...

To sum up, thought, action, emotion exclude examination of oneself. Whenever, in life, one is actively involved in something, or one suffers violently, one cannot think about oneself.

Conclusion: since almost everything escapes self-observation, one cannot draw general conclusions from introspection ... By the very fact that one keeps a watch on oneself, one changes; and the change is for the worse since we prevent that which is of greatest value in us from playing its part.

(Weil 1995: 27-28)

Weil reinforces the idea that thought about the world, constitutive of attention, is incompatible with introspection. Also, for Weil, 'introspection defeats its own object', since all it can reveal is the present act of introspecting, and when applied to past states of mind, it is equally unsuccessful, because one can be mistaken about one's past inner life, especially in the light of more recent experiences (Weil 1995: 28). Moreover, one's states of mind are changed by the act of introspecting, and the change is for the worse, since we are preventing consciousness from being enriched by knowledge of reality. This is another reason to reject introspection as a way to achieve self-knowledge and moral progress. The problem of introspection in Murdoch, however, is not yet settled, as we shall see.

2 The Importance of Self-Knowledge

Despite the difficulties of accounting for self-knowledge, the solution cannot lie in denying its importance. Since, on the model proposed, what interferes with attention is self-gratifying fantasy, the moral subject needs to be aware of her self in order to know that distortion may be taking place at all, and then in order to control the self to prevent it from continuing on the path of illusion.²¹⁷ Since moral progress takes place through liberation from fantasy, some degree of self-knowledge is not only helpful but necessary for moral progress.²¹⁸

As many have noted, the very story of M and D, designed to make a case for the moral importance of the inner life conceived of independently of any outward action or manifestation, is also an instance of self-reflection as conducive to moral improvement.²¹⁹ M's activity is an example of attention; at the same time, coming to the decision to 'look again', the mother in law, who is said to be 'capable of self-criticism', reflects on herself and on the biases that may have led her to judge D too harshly. If M did not wonder whether she may be snobbish or suspect that she may be jealous, there would be no progress in attention: the suspicion of some bias in herself acts both as spur and as guidance in the act of attention. To become aware both of the need to attend to D, and to make sure that, to the extent that it is possible, the act of attention is being successful, M needs some degree of self-knowledge.

What has been said above does not deny the possibility of an exceptionally virtuous subject, attending to reality without any self-directed distortions, and without any awareness of herself. But this individual (what Murdoch sometimes refers to as the 'virtuous peasant') appears accidentally virtuous and unknowingly so. Her selflessness and ability to attend are spontaneous and natural, but because they are so, there is no room for conscious effort for improvement, nor, importantly, for the individual to know whether they are being good or not. Allowing for this happy accident, and for the possibility of being good 'unknowingly', still leaves the necessity, for the majority of us, to struggle for moral improvement in ways that, involving attention, also seem to involve self-knowledge. Murdoch's claims about

²¹⁷ 'The ego is indeed "unbridled". Continuous control is required' (MGM 260).

²¹⁸ I say 'some degree', because not all self-knowledge is important for attention, but only insofar as it helps to avoid fantasy.

²¹⁹ This point has been observed by Mole (2007: 75), Vice (2007: 63), Antonaccio (2000: 87) and Nussbaum (1990:46).

natural selfishness and the tendency to be concerned with oneself are not meant as metaphysical claims; they are, rather, reminders of what people tend to be like and that attention is not spontaneous for them.²²⁰

We are left with what appears to be a paradox: attention, as the activity fundamental to morality, requires outward directedness; but in order to know whether one is really attending, one needs to direct one's focus inward, to obtain knowledge about oneself. To avoid this paradox it would be necessary provide an account of self-knowledge which does not consist in a gaze directed 'inward'. While behaviourism can provide just this kind of account, Murdoch's insistence on the importance of an observable inner life – observable, as with M&D, in the absence of any external sign – prevents us from adopting this solution. Examining how Murdoch understands the inner life will help to clarify her reasons for rejecting both introspection and behaviourism, and to suggest a third kind of account of self-knowledge that she could endorse.

3 The Importance of the Inner Life: Murdoch Vs. Wittgenstein

Murdoch understands the 'inner life' or 'consciousness' as the observable aspect or manifestation of the self. The individual self is defined as the 'moral centre or substance' (MGM 153) and consciousness is the 'value-bearing continuum' (MGM 148) upon which the morality of the individual depends. Murdoch suggests a view of the inner life as 'rich and observable': on this view, it is not just possible, but desirable, to observe and thus come to know oneself.²²¹

Murdoch develops her notion of inner life as something observable and 'private' in opposition to 'behaviourist Wittgensteinian' theories which seem to deny it any substance. What she means by 'private' is crucial to understanding her view of the inner, and will become clearer later. The 'Wittgensteinian' theories of the mind she is referring to are mainly those proposed by Hampshire (1959, 1963) and Ryle (1949, 1951), which, in her view, effectively remove the inner life from consideration. If all that can be understood and assessed is behaviour, or what is public, then what is ordinarily conceived as a 'private inner entity' is either not

²²⁰ Her remarks about 'original sin', connected with Freudian ideas about the psyche as egocentric and not entirely under one's control, suggest a view of human beings as 'fallen' precisely because of their natural self-directedness. This does not exclude, however, instances of salvation or 'grace', as a 'reward' for efforts of attention. Cf. SG 47, 51.

²²¹ Cf. for ex. MGM 153, 234, 259, 265, 282, 292.

existent or unnecessary (see SG 10-11). The point of these observations, in SG, is moral: if inner states cannot be observed in their own right, what matters morally is only action and the moral agent is evaluated according to what she does, not according to her thoughts or states of mind.

Although Murdoch acknowledges that those theories were only inspired, but not endorsed, by Wittgenstein himself, the latter is still to an extent considered answerable for having deprived the inner life of ‘substance’. In the chapter on Wittgenstein in MGM (Chapter 9: ‘Wittgenstein and the Inner Life’) the criticism is sharpened: Wittgenstein is seen to threaten the legitimacy of the concepts of ‘experience’ and ‘privacy’, which Murdoch wants to defend. In doing so, she seems to support the necessity of an introspective inward gaze, which her own claims about attention and outward-direction deny. Looking in more detail at her criticism of Wittgenstein, however, can clarify why this is not the case.

The general worry that Murdoch expresses in relation to Wittgenstein is that, with his account of language and his remarks about inner states, *something* important about the inner life is lost. Wittgenstein is mentioned in different places in association with a ‘sense of loss’ directed at the inner: ‘what we “lose” in the *Investigations* is some sort of inner thing’ (MGM 49). Yet it is not part of the criticism that Wittgenstein’s view excludes the inner itself, or renders it irrelevant. So what exactly is the problem? Wittgenstein is introduced in the context of the critique of the Cartesian inner datum, as effecting a *welcome* removal of ‘metaphysical entities’. Yet immediately a worry sets in: isn’t the critique of a certain picture of the inner going too far in the opposite direction? Can the rejection of the notion of ‘private object’ render what is experienced as inner and private meaningless, when not publicly accessible in some way?

Murdoch’s discussion of Wittgenstein on the inner life revolves around two related issues: on the one hand, the possibility of words and concepts having a personal aspect above and beyond their public use (which includes the experiences that accompany them);²²² on the other, the status of the inner life and the possibility of conceiving any inner state independent of its relation to the outer. Both the personal aspect of concepts, and the reality and identifiability of the inner life, are important for Murdoch in order to ground her ideas about morality: if morality is

²²² These ideas are particularly prominent in the earlier essays, such as NP and TL.

equated with a consciousness that is oriented to the Good and attentive to the real, then the observability of consciousness is central to the argument. The view also hinges on there being a personal element to knowledge and perception, which explains the existence of different yet equally correct takes on a situation, and how one's moral being is expressed in how one sees the world.

Wittgenstein is presented in MGM as having helpfully dealt with a philosophical mistake (the 'inner thought outer thing dualism', MGM 270) by questioning the idea that concepts about inner states must have an inner referent accessible only to the subject. However, reading the remarks about the man who writes 'S' on his calendar whenever he has a particular sensation, Murdoch feels that something more than a mistaken philosophical picture is being attacked. Wittgenstein's recurrent questioning of the possibility of identifying a sensation, conceived as something only the subject has access to, hinges on the notion of criteria for sense. And criteria must be public: otherwise the process of checking the identity of a sensation becomes like an idle exercise with no standard of correctness. 'An inner state stands in need of outward criteria' (PI 580): 'S man' (as she calls him) cannot meaningfully refer to his sensation because there are no criteria of correctness for the names he chooses on his own: nothing can determine whether he is using the name correctly each time he believes he has the sensation, and nothing but his memory testifies to the identity of the sensation.

S-man can talk of his sensation only using a language which is public, or outer. Murdoch worries: the example seems to her construed to show 'the emptiness of the inner when not evidently connected with the outer.' (MGM 273) The inner life, she acknowledges, is not eliminated by these remarks, but becomes secondary: 'the vast concept of experience subsists as something inward ... but dependent upon, situated by, a public outer' (MGM 276). What Murdoch sees Wittgenstein as threatening is 'the very general idea of processes as stream of consciousness, inner reflection, imagery, in fact our experience as inner (unspoken, undemonstrated) being' (MGM 273). Her concern is to maintain a sense of inner life conceived as at least partly independent of the outer: the stream of consciousness as observable without reference to a public domain. ('Example of moral activity: inhibiting malicious thoughts', MGM 153).

It is not, as Murdoch herself admits, the logically private inner that she wants to defend. Rather, something much more 'mundane', and contingent: the

possibility for the individual to think about the inner life without any outward criterion for the meaning of her observations. This is one, less problematic, understanding of the ‘privacy’ that Murdoch wants to preserve: the privacy to which she is committed is that of M and D, where something morally relevant is happening, yet no one but M may ever know about it. This is Murdoch’s general idea: that states of mind can matter morally without having to be connected with any outward activity. As she puts it:

When, for instance, I feel that I am morally responsible for having had a particular thought, what I am concerned with here is one such self-contained event. Or if I suddenly make a decision ... though I were to die the next moment it would still be true. (NP 46)

None of these ideas are threatened, contrary to Murdoch’s worries, by the private language argument, which can account for M’s activity by reminding us that she is using words of the public language to analyse and describe her inner state. Yet Murdoch also objects to this thought: what about experiences that do not seem amenable to framing into concepts and words, and yet are felt to be there, as part of consciousness? Wittgenstein leaves this open. Yet Murdoch insists that, as our experience testifies, there is a lot that occurs ‘inwardly’ that exceeds language or other forms of public exposition. In TL she classifies inner experience on a spectrum of communicability: there are fully verbalised thoughts, but there are also thoughts that present themselves as confused, floating images, and both should be acknowledged. Language and concepts play a ‘crystallising role’ with respect to the inner, but such crystallisation does not always occur or is not always possible; yet the inner exists even when unconceptualised.²²³ Thus, Wittgenstein is accused both of curtailing the ‘vastness’ of the inner and of denying the personal aspect of thinking and language, the individual experience. This is the second sense of ‘privacy’ that Murdoch requires for the inner life: the possibility for each individual to have their own understanding of words and concepts, as well as particular experiences connected with them and unconceptualised experiences. Murdoch does not deny that concepts are fundamentally shared, nor is she claiming that experience should determine meaning, as in PI 273; but she wants to make room, also, for personal or idiosyncratic experience in relation to language: ‘of course, in a general

²²³ ‘Our whole busy moral-aesthetic intellectual creativity abounds in private insoluble difficulties, mysterious half understood mental configurations. A great part of our thinking is the retention of such entities’ (MGM 280).

sense, language must have rules. But it is also the property of individuals whose inner private consciousness, seething with arcane imagery and shadowy intuitions, occupies the greater part of their being' (MGM 275).

It is a central aspect of Murdoch's view of morality that the moral life 'takes place' in the inner life or consciousness of the individual, and is defined by the individual's particularity. The inner life is a complex, held together by the individual self it 'belongs' to; its structure or 'orientation', experiences and thoughts, are personal, peculiar to the subject: 'the concept of the individual depends on a moral sense of the value and status of privacy and the inner life' (294). If, on the other hand, the inner life were secondary to the public life, the whole sense of moral life would become impersonal, rather than an expression of the individual; morality would be played out on the public stage of action and purely inner states would have no moral relevance. Murdoch's rejection of behaviourism is clear.

4 Rejecting the Introspection Model

Neither Murdoch's insistence on the privacy of the inner life, nor her views about the personal and idiosyncratic aspect of it, on the other hand, commits her to a Cartesian view of the self, as might be suspected at first. Although for Murdoch self-awareness consists in the awareness of an 'inner life' which may not be manifest in behaviour nor entirely expressible in (public) language, that does not need to be conceived as an 'inward glance' or as *logically* independent of the outer, public world. Murdoch's view of the inner life, important for morality, is not in fact at odds with Wittgenstein's remarks; her criticism, as she acknowledges, mainly concerns the possible consequences of his view. In what follows, I shall suggest that, far from being discordant, some of Wittgenstein's thoughts can help to construe a picture of self-knowledge that accommodates Murdoch's requirements about the inner, while, crucially, not being achieved by looking inward, and so can be part of the requirement of attention as an outward look.

Despite seeing them as harmful influences on moral philosophy, Murdoch acknowledges that Wittgenstein and the philosophers inspired by him have done a service to philosophy in the removal of the Cartesian 'inner datum' (see SG 15). Even though Murdoch sets the critique quickly to the side, and in fact continues by pointing out its dangers, it is important to consider her approval a little further. The

defence of the inner life as something ‘private’ and independent of the public/outer sphere, in the context of the criticism of Wittgenstein, can look dangerously akin to a nostalgic nod to the inner datum. After all, Murdoch is keen to remind us, concerning the inner/outer division, that ‘*a sense of that separation* is one of our deepest experiences’ (MGM 282). But the italics should give us pause, and the same passage continues to disclose the motive for the reminder: ‘Is not some denial or obfuscation of this picture a move in the direction of behaviourism?’ (MGM 282). The desired aim, then, is to find not so much a middle ground but rather a third picture, between behaviourism and Cartesianism (‘the choice must be rejected between behaviourism and private theatre’, TL 38), which makes room for the individual and her personal inner life without collapsing the inner into the outer nor sealing one off from the other.

Together with the private inner datum, the related introspective conception of self-knowledge is also discarded. Murdoch accepts that Wittgenstein and ‘Wittgensteinians’ have been helpful ‘by destroying the misleading image of the infallible inner eye’ (SG 15). They presented a radical critique of the idea that self-knowledge can be obtained by introspection, classically understood on the ‘perceptual model’ of the ‘inner theatre’, where one’s mind can be observed in the same way as one observes objects in the world, with the difference that the ‘objects’ of introspection are private to the subject. However, the positive part of such a critique suggests an understanding of self-knowledge that relies entirely on public observable facts. Ryle’s suggestion, for example, is that we understand ourselves in the same way as others, based on behaviour, which includes language and ‘unstudied utterances’ (1949: Chapter vi). So there are criteria for identifying the inner, and they are a matter of behaviour.

This is precisely what Murdoch fears Wittgenstein’s remarks may lead to. But Wittgenstein’s rejection of the perceptual model does not have the consequence that, if there seem to be no criteria for identifying certain sensations (PI 258), then we need to move the object of our enquiry from the hazy inner to the observable outer. Wittgenstein is in fact questioning the whole idea of seeking a relation of reference in the case of sensations (PI 244). That is the meaning of the ‘beetle in the box’ example: if a sensation is pictured as something that only the subject has access to, it becomes impossible to talk about it, because there is no way to know

whether one's use of the same word refer to the same 'thing' as others have; so, *if* this picture is used, the inner state itself becomes irrelevant.

Had the force of that 'if' been more strongly felt by Murdoch, she might have taken those remarks as helpful in her own project of rejecting the 'inner object' model for inner states. In TL and NP (two essays from the early 50s, so before the publication of PI), Murdoch herself comes to grips with the question of the status of inner experiences and their expression. After giving voice to a natural inclination to think of experience as something the subject alone can inspect and verify, she rejects both that view and its alternative, the 'verificationist' approach, which finds justification for claims about the inner in behaviour. Both views, although opposed, rely on an 'ontological approach, which seeks for an identifiable inner stuff and either asserts or denies its existence' (TL 38), which she rejects. The temptation to think in those terms is just what Wittgenstein addresses with examples such as the 'beetle', and then replies: 'the sensation itself ... – It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either!' (PI 304).²²⁴

The second part of Murdoch's TL is an attempt to suggest ways in which we can examine our inner life and describe it, without appeal to behaviour:

It is pointless, when faced with the behaviourist-existentialist picture of the mind, to go on endlessly fretting about the identification of particular inner events ... by producing, as it were, a series of indubitably objective little things. 'Not a report' need not entail 'not an activity' ... we need a 'change of key'. (TL 23-4)

A change of key is what Wittgenstein offers in PI. While Murdoch's different key stresses the importance of individual and contextual understanding, Wittgenstein's remarks work more closely on dispelling the misleading picture. Even if he does not show at length how we do examine and understand our inner states – except through reminders of how we do not do it – the picture that he suggests is one which can support Murdoch's own.

5 Self-Knowledge as Looking Outward

Wittgenstein's alternative suggestion divides self-knowledge into different kinds, depending on the kind of inner state involved. In the case of inner states like

²²⁴ This point is explained clearly by Wright (1998): 'the *Investigations* repeatedly counsels against construing understanding, hoping, fearing, intending, etc. as mental states or processes. Wittgenstein's idea was not, of course, that there are no such things, strictly, as mental processes, or the states that would constitute their end-points, so to speak, but only that understanding, etc. will be misunderstood if assimilated to them – some are attitudinal avowals, the others are phenomenal ones' (Wright 1998: 21).

sensations, for example pain, Wittgenstein rejects the application of the concept of knowledge at all, because knowledge requires the possibility of doubt and verification, which is absent when it comes to sensations: the subject cannot doubt whether she is in pain, and she cannot verify it by appealing to anything external to the sensation. Thus, with sensations, instead of knowing them, Wittgenstein suggests, we just have them (PI 246). Instead of thinking of the pain as an inner ‘thing’ which we observe introspectively and then name, pain is seen as a sensation with natural expressions. The word ‘pain’ is a replacement for such expressions. Learning to replace the expression with the word is a public activity, depending on interaction with others, on observing when other people use the word, as a child hears it uttered by the parents when she cries, for instance.²²⁵ Self-awareness (rather than self-knowledge), in the case of sensations like pain, is not a matter of looking inward, but simply of having the sensation. But how the subject *talks* about the sensation depends on the contexts or ‘language games’ in which the sensation finds its place. This is a first reason, limited to sensations, to believe that an inward gaze does not provide self-knowledge.

Not all self-ascriptions work on the model of sensations. While with sensations Wittgenstein rejects the notion of ‘knowledge’ because there is no place for uncertainty or doubt, other inner states, like happiness or jealousy, call for different considerations and include the possibility of doubt. Before discussing those states, it must be noted that Wittgenstein also provides considerations that apply to all inner states: the idea that concepts about inner states, like ‘jealousy’ or ‘pain’, are not best thought of as inner ‘things’ or data, and that they are learned in a public sphere. We learn concepts about the inner in social interaction because concepts are to a large extent public. This is not to deny, to answer Murdoch’s worry in MGM, that they are concepts *about* inner states. The concept ‘pain’ refers to pain, not to pain behaviour, and pain behaviour is not the same as pain (‘what greater difference could there be?’ – PI 304). On Wittgenstein’s suggestion, learning what ‘deciding’ means is not, as Murdoch fears (in SG 13), merely a matter of watching what someone who says ‘I have decided’ does, as if the behaviour

²²⁵ See PI 244: ‘Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour’. Mulhall (2007), reading Wittgenstein, sees the ability to articulate one’s inner life as an ‘internalisation of otherness’, because it comes from interaction with others (2007: 112).

pattern exhausted the concept. At the same time, understanding a concept or a word involves public interaction. Knowing what ‘pain’ or ‘jealousy’ mean requires knowing what people do with them.

This idea is, in fact, endorsed by Murdoch. Even when defending the ‘personal’ use of language, she starts by admitting, for instance: ‘Of course language depends very generally upon areas of “agreement”’ (MGM 281); in SG, the man who is thinking about repentance is said to make a ‘personal use’ of the concept; yet, ‘*of course* he derives the concept initially from his surroundings’ (SG 25-6). At the same time as she is arguing for the idiosyncrasy of language, Murdoch also emphasises its public aspect in terms of ‘shared attention’: ‘we learn through attending to contexts, vocabulary develops through close attention to objects ... use of words by persons grouped round a common object is a central and vital human activity’ (SG 32). Language depends on contexts, attending to the object of one’s language can increase its poignancy, and the developing of language and concepts is an activity that takes place with others.

The rejection of the inner datum and the considerations about the public nature of concepts provide a second reason to claim that introspection does not provide self-knowledge, and a first reason to claim, instead, that self-knowledge can be obtained through a focus directed outward. As the above discussion of the inner life in Wittgenstein shows, the concepts we use in self-understanding are not ‘private’ concepts, but are, qua concepts, public. If the meaning of ‘jealousy’, for instance, depends on how we use the word, in what contexts, for what purposes, in relation to what reports about their inner states, and *also* how people who are said to be jealous behave, in order to become clear about whether one is jealous one needs also to pay attention to the context of use of the word. Context and inner state are correlate, and one does not provide meaning without the other.

Knowing about one’s jealousy is not merely a matter of looking inward and seeing, independently of other people’s use of the word, what it is that one ‘finds’ there. Murdoch seems to agree with this Wittgensteinian point in a remark against Husserl and Descartes: ‘the identification of the inner involves a variety of concepts ... whose meaning is established, and whose use in such a context is justified, in the external world remote from the deep position taken by the cogito and the phenomenological reduction’ (MGM 234). This idea does not deny the possibility of a personal understanding of the concept, depending for example on one’s life

experience, which Murdoch is keen to defend. But it shows that the concept cannot be ‘made up’ by the individual, and the personal understanding is a development grounded on the contexts in which the concept is learned. If concepts, including concepts about the inner, depend to an extent on their public use, and if inner states are not something the subject can become aware of merely by introspection, the dualism between inner and outer begins to vacillate, and self-understanding begins to look less like a matter of introspection or looking inward.

There is a third consideration, introduced by Wittgenstein, which is quite helpful for solving the tension between self-knowledge and outward focus, and thus to explain M’s self-critical activity in a way that is compatible with the requirements of attention. Here Wittgenstein presents a typical case of self-examination, where it is possible to doubt one’s inner states. Someone ask themselves:

‘Do I really love her or am I only pretending to myself?’ and the process of introspection is the calling up of memories; of imagined possible situations, and of the feelings that one would have if... (PI 587)

What is here called ‘the process of introspection’ is not the standard meaning of ‘introspection’, as I have been referring to it, understood as looking inward. It refers, rather, to the process of understanding one’s inner state, which revolves, instead, around thoughts about the *object* of one’s emotions – so self-examination appears not to be (in my sense) a matter of introspection at all. In the cases of inner states which go beyond immediate sensation, and where the possibility of doubt and knowledge applies, as the example shows, self-knowledge is achieved by examining the object of the inner state, rather than the state itself. If one tries to understand it in isolation, the inner state (the jealousy, the love, the resentment) in fact loses its identity as a state about something or someone, and is no longer that of which knowledge can be obtained.

To return to Weil’s remarks quoted in §1, introspection does not yield self-knowledge, but in fact distorts that about which it tries to acquire knowledge. The object of introspection is an inner state (or indeed a character trait), but inner states are essentially about something in the world. In Murdoch’s model, the self (including consciousness) is a ‘system of energy’, which depends on the objects to which energy is directed. Therefore, to understand one’s love or one’s prejudices, one needs to direct attention to the objects of those states, not inwardly to the self.

This idea is helpfully developed by Richard Moran (2001) in his exploration of ‘relations of transparency’. Moran quotes Gareth Evans, who comments on

Wittgenstein's remark against the idea of self-knowledge as involving an 'inward glance':

In making a self ascription of belief, one's eyes are directed outward – upon the world. If someone asks me 'Do you think there is going to be a Third World War?' I must attend, in answering him, to precisely the same outward phenomena as I would attend to if I were answering the question 'Will there be a third world war?' (Evans 1982: 225, quoted in Moran 2001: 61)

In the example, the belief about war is 'transparent' because its nature is discovered by looking, not at the belief, but at the object of such belief – in this case, by thinking about the possibility of another world war. (Transparency only works in the first-person perspective: to know about someone else's states of mind, examining their objects is not sufficient.) The case of transparency presented above, however, concerns belief, where the answer to the question 'Do I believe that P' is equivalent to the answer to 'Is P true?'. Moran acknowledges that not all inner states work in this way.

Can all self-knowledge be construed in this way – including knowledge of one's jealousy, love, resentment? Wittgenstein's and Weil's remarks above suggest a positive answer. Moran adds a consideration about the importance of the intentions or attitudes involved in self-knowledge, suggesting two possible attitudes to self-knowledge applicable to such cases: a 'theoretical' and a 'deliberative' attitude. With inner states other than beliefs, the relation of transparency holds when the theoretical attitude (a contemplative attitude with a psychological interest about one's inner states) is deferred to the deliberative one (which questions what the appropriate inner state is) (Moran 2001: 63). The theoretical approach to self-knowledge is described as a kind of self-indulgence, common in sentimental literature, where the scrutiny of one's inner life is 'a contemplative one, separate from questions about the world that those states of his are presumably directed upon' (Moran 2001: 58). Separate from the object of one's inner state, it is questionable whether the enquiry can constitute self-knowledge, and indeed Moran comments that the inner state in question 'is likely to be inapt or fixated'. It is in cases like these that the attempt to gain self-knowledge takes the form of 'looking inward', which Murdoch warns against. Understood thus, 'in the sense of a minute understanding of one's own machinery', Murdoch has reasons to claim that "self-knowledge" seems to me ... usually a delusion' (SG 67).

But the self-knowledge involved in attention is not of the 'theoretical' kind.

On the contrary, attention includes specific attitudes and intentions, and central to these is the intention to see clearly and justly. So, in Moran's framework, the self-knowledge required by attention cannot be 'theoretical', but it is rather 'deliberative', because it involves a concern which is directed not to the self, but to the object of one's inner states, including a concern to discover which response the object merits. The primary question addressed to the self in attention is: 'Am I being just to x?', where knowledge of the self (whether one is being just) is dependent on a grasp of the object. Moran associates this attitude with the moral notion of responsibility. Returning to the M&D example, M's interest, in asking herself whether she is jealous, is not to contemplate her inner life; it is, rather, to understand whether her jealousy may have become a part of her view of D, distorting her perception. As in deliberative self-knowledge, M is concerned with her inner states in terms of their relation to truth (because attention is aimed at truth): 'Is my attitude warranted, or is my perception of D mistaken?' In cases such as these, the self-understanding required is obtained by looking outward rather than inward, 'away from the self' as Murdoch recommends. It is, indeed, through the attempt to *attend* to the object, that one's consciousness becomes properly present to oneself, avoiding the distortions created by directing attention to the inner life conceived independently of the outer. In this way, as Murdoch claims, "'inner" can ... fuse with "outer" and not be lost' (MGM 280).

This model does not account for all kinds of self-knowledge, but only for the self-knowledge involved in attention and which is related to the possibility of achieving correct perception of reality. It also becomes evident that, contrary to the initial presentation of self-knowledge as being required prior to the act of attention, self-knowledge is rather concomitant to the act of attention: because inner states depend on their object, it is not until one tries to perceive the object attentively that awareness of the impediments to such perception begins to emerge. In turn, such awareness is instrumental to the removal of such impediments, and thus to the successful completion of the act of attention.²²⁶

Conclusions

This chapter concludes the examination of the role of the self in attention. Chapter

²²⁶ On this model, as in perception of reality discussed in Chapter 5, knowledge of the self is also non-inferential, as well as determined by the moral quality of the subject.

6 offered a justification for the participation of the self in attention as a contributing element to clear and correct perception (through knowledge, virtue, etc.). That involved the definition of unselfing as uprooting, not the self as a whole, but the self's tendency toward self-concern ('ego') and the consequent direction of the gaze inward, toward the self. While that account had the merit of accommodating the objectivity of attention with Murdoch's general stress on the importance of the individual and her consciousness in morality, the claim that attention must be directed outward seemed to threaten the possibility of self-knowledge, if conceived as introspection or inner-directed gaze. On the other hand, the behaviouristic account of self-knowledge, while consistent with an outward focus, clashed with Murdoch's idea that states of mind (such as attention) are morally relevant by themselves, independently of any outward manifestation.

Nevertheless, it was crucial to find an account of self-knowledge that could fit the requirements of attention, because attention involves precisely the elimination of distortions coming from the self, and without self-knowledge it would be impossible to identify the interference of the self, or to know whether one is being attentive at all. In order to find such an account, Murdoch's view of the inner life has been analysed, and her rejection of both behaviourism and introspection spelt out. What has emerged is a third way, derived from Wittgenstein, which is compatible with Murdoch's framework. The third way consists in presenting a model of self-knowledge whereby inner states are revealed by an outward directed look. Firstly, in the cases of sensations, the knowledge is immediate and no introspection is needed; secondly, in relation to all inner states, the concepts required to identify them are public, which means that to learn them and improve one's understanding of them it is necessary to observe their use in contexts and by other people, which again means looking at the world and not at the self; thirdly and most importantly, the inner states relevant to attention, which need to be known in order to understand if one is being truthful and just, are 'transparent' to their objects, which means that the object determines the inner state: in order to understand one's inner state, it is necessary to attend to the object, and not to the self.

It can therefore be seen that attention and self-knowledge do not need to be at odds: in order to attend one needs to know whether one's self is interfering, but such knowledge is not gained by an inward gaze but by the very process of trying

to attend to the world. As Murdoch herself writes, ‘much of our self-awareness is other awareness’ (MGM 495). Self-knowledge, then, need not be introspective, in the sense of observing an inner object, detached from the outer world. Nor does it need to privilege the outer at the expense of the inner. Instead, a genuine understanding of one’s self is achieved through attention to the world.

Self-knowledge, therefore, is concomitant with the attempt to attend, because it is only when one is trying to look at the object justly that one’s inner states in relation to that object become clearer, and in turn, such awareness contributes to the possibility to attend. Thus the process of attention, besides providing knowledge about the world and about oneself at the same time, also occasions a change in one’s inner being, connected with the moral progress that the exercise of attention brings about. In the words of Rilke, quoted by Murdoch:

Looking ... we are turned absolutely toward the outside, but when we are most of all so, things happen in us that have waited longingly to be observed, and while they reach completion in us ... *without our aid*, – their significance grows up in the object outside. (NP 56)

Conclusions

This thesis has been an exploration of the idea that particular cognitive attitudes and the exercise of particular faculties can be instrumental to, and in some cases even sufficient for, moral understanding and moral perception. The idea has been explored through an analysis of Iris Murdoch's work. According to Murdoch, attention, which she conceptualises as involving the exercise of the imagination, emotional engagement, a desire for the Good and the truth, and a selfless attitude, is what can enable the individual to apprehend moral reality. Such apprehension is both intellectual and perceptual, because intellectual faculties and attitudes are, according to Murdoch, inherent in perception. Therefore, Murdoch argues, attention makes possible moral understanding as well as moral perception. On this view, the main burden of morality lies, not so much in what we do, but what or how we are (cf. Taylor 1989:3), and more specifically what and how we see and know.

In this thesis I have sought to make a case for the importance of attention in morality as based on Murdoch's thought. The exploration of Murdoch's philosophy has been fruitful, because Murdoch provides a comprehensive – although not exhaustive – picture of morality, from metaphysics, through epistemology to moral psychology. Her philosophical work is attracting a growing scholarship (including recently Antonaccio 2000 and 2012b, Lovibond 2011, Broackes 2012, Forsberg 2013) as well as proving influential in contemporary debates on moral perception (Blum 1994), moral cognitivism (McDowell 2001), and her idea of attention is among the key concepts in the ethics of care (Baier 1994, Ruddick 1989) and in recent philosophy of love (Larson 2009, Jollimore 2011, Milligan, 2013 and 2014). Murdoch's concept of attention is central to her moral philosophy, and draws together the main areas of her thought. Exploring attention, therefore, has meant exploring the underlying commitments which, Murdoch holds, allow for the possibility to claim that morality depends, to a large extent, on how we 'see' reality.

There is little agreement, in Murdoch's philosophical scholarship, on the meaning of some of her key ideas, in particular on the kind of realism and cognitivism that she presents, on which the meaning of attention depends. Therefore, in order to clarify the meaning and role of attention in morality, as Murdoch understands it, my method has consisted, first of all, in a critical

examination of the central aspects of Murdoch's thought. It has been necessary, as a background, to present an overall picture of it, in order to then focus on the elements that contribute to understanding attention and to making a case for its importance. My method has two main aspects. Firstly and mainly, it involves a close reading of Murdoch's work. In relation to it, I have discussed her commentators, where they helpfully clarify a point (for example, Diamond (2010, 2014) on the meaning of 'experience' in Chapter 1), or where they contribute to forming what I consider a misleading picture of Murdoch's thought (for example, Antonaccio's (2000, 2012b) 'reflexive realism' in Chapter 2). Secondly, I have used the work of philosophers who do not comment on Murdoch, but whose thought can bring out certain aspects of her ideas in a clearer and more poignant manner than Murdoch herself does: primarily, Simone Weil, and secondarily, John McDowell and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Weil occupies a prominent position in this work because she developed, before Murdoch, an idea of attention that includes most of the elements that I have highlighted as allowing us to consider attention as important in morality, and because Murdoch herself is deeply inspired by Weil, although the debt is not always fully acknowledged. Part of my task has been to make the debt clearer, and to point out where Murdoch's ideas can benefit from a more explicit contribution from Weil.

Through reading Murdoch, her commentators, and other philosophers, I have sought to offer, on the one hand, a picture of her moral thought which, while it does not claim to be a detailed account of her whole philosophy, nevertheless captures its overall thrust and spirit. Murdoch's own method consists of critiquing action-based views of morality, and of building up, by assembling observations, an alternative picture that the reader may be expected to recognise as capturing her *experience* of the moral life. However, perhaps because of their intuitive appeal, some aspects of her thought do not appear to be fully spelled out, while some ideas seem to be in tension with others she presents. For these reasons, part of my task has been to spell out some of Murdoch's concepts (not only attention, but also love, self, the Good, reality, truth, transcendence, the transcendental, perception, knowledge), and to find a possible solution between apparently conflicting ideas, principally the concepts and the ideas around which the importance of attention revolves.

The central tension that I have identified in Murdoch's thought, and that needed to be addressed in order to explain the importance of attention in morality, was the tension between the claims about the reality of the Good and of value, and their transcendental nature. Good and value appear to be both part of reality and part of the structures with which the mind grasps reality. Both ideas, however, are used to justify the value of attention: on the one hand, attention is what enables to apprehend a moral reality, which is objectively there; on the other, attention is important because it is a virtuous state of mind, where thought and perception are informed by the right values.

My suggestion has been to consider the evaluative states of mind, when correct or good, as being driven by the value that is in reality. While thought can be structured by what one takes to be good, particular values can be objects of perception, but only if the perceiver is in the appropriately virtuous mental state to observe them. In this way, it can be claimed that attention is a virtuous attitude, or the exercise of a complex of faculties, which enable the apprehension of a moral reality that does not depend on the subject, although its apprehension does (Chapter 2). This also lends dual value to the idea of moral perception, which I present after the four chapters discussing the two apparently conflicting ideas (Chapters 1-4): the dual value of moral perception comes from considering it as morally laden perception of a moral reality. Chapter 5 ('Moral Perception') is, therefore, where the discussion of the metaphysical and moral psychological background to attention culminates. Specifically, having suggested one way to understand Murdoch's commitment to the reality of value in Chapter 2, and why the individual's faculties and attitudes involved in attention can be instrumental to objectivity (in Murdoch's sense) in Chapters 3 and 4, in Chapter 5 I discuss how attention can be understood as the virtuous state of mind that enables the perception of the value that is part of reality. If attention can play this role, its moral importance is justified. The practise of attention and the role of the self in it are the subject matter of the last two chapters, where I suggest ways to make sense of Murdoch's notion of unselfing without denying the importance of the self and its contribution to perception (Chapter 6), and where I discuss how to attain self-knowledge while attending to the reality that lies outside the subject (Chapter 7).

What has emerged is a picture of the moral life where the emphasis is shifted from action onto modes of thinking and perceiving. This picture lies on two

fundamental assumptions. The first is the assumption that what we see and thus know, in short what we perceive, depends to an extent on us, and thus is something we can be responsible for. This assumption can be understood in a less controversial way, which is that one can be responsible for finding out about some things, and for not ignoring relevant information. But it can also, more controversially, mean that the kind of information we are presented with depends on our epistemic attitudes: the values, desires, character traits, previous knowledge and expectations that form the background of the individual's consciousness play a role in determining what the facts perceived are, including their significance and the salience of their component parts. In this sense, correct perception is morally valuable both because of what it reveals and in itself. My interpretation of Murdoch includes both senses of individual responsibility in creating and shaping cognition all the way down to perception.

The second assumption is that what and how we perceive is the basis on which moral judgment and action rest. This assumption, too, can be divided into a more and a less ambitious meaning. In a less ambitious sense, perceiving correctly and being aware of the relevant facts is fundamental to any view of morality. Perhaps because of its obvious nature, this observation is not often stressed in moral theory, with the possible exception of virtue ethics, in which *phronesis* or practical wisdom includes the ability to correctly perceive a situation in terms of its moral features. But the burden of *phronesis* lies in its link with the possibility of action, while the claim Murdoch makes is more basic, concerning perception itself. Nonetheless, no moral theory denies the importance of correct perception, with the differences lying in what use is made of it, and to what extent correct perception is itself considered a moral achievement. The correct application of principles, in every case, depends on the correct perception of the situation or facts the principles are applied to. Hence, correct perception of the relevant facts is the bedrock of morality.

More ambitiously, Murdoch claims that perception also determines the perceiver's responses. This is, broadly defined, the meaning of moral perception presented. On this view, perception can, in ideal conditions, do all the moral work: it determines what the situation is, it discloses its moral features, and it provides the reasons as well as the motivations for action (that is, it does so where appropriate: action may not always be the fitting response). This claim is grounded on an

understanding of perception as operating through concepts, which link the mind and the world. If concepts are considered as part of human lives, which involve patterns of desires and concerns, then it is possible to claim that some concepts are inherently connected with certain responses: as, for instance, what is threatening calls for avoidance, so what is cruel calls for reproach, or the attempt to stop it, etc. These patterns and responses cannot, however, be generalised into rules: moral responses depend on the application of concepts in perception, where concepts are applied differently depending on the concrete situation, and with different aspects being salient each time. For this reason, my interpretation of Murdoch supports moral particularism.

The main contention that emerges from my analysis of Murdoch is that correct perception, in the demanding senses of being both a moral achievement and something that elicits the appropriate responses, is made possible by the exercise of attention. Attention involves, potentially, all the faculties and is motivated by the desire to perceive its object truthfully and justly, while at the same time attempting to remove bias and distortions that come from self-protection and self-gratification. If a situation is approached attentively, the subject will be in the best position to perceive its moral features, including the possibilities for action, and thus to respond accordingly

To claim that attention is central to morality does not, crucially, exclude other considerations and other methods to achieve moral understanding and to secure right action. On the one hand, the least demanding aspects of this picture, as I have just sketched it, are compatible with other views of morality and moral theories. On the other, in its more ambitious aspects, the argument for the importance of attention is intended to suggest that being attentive can put the subject, in the right circumstances, in the *best possible* position to perceive moral reality and to respond appropriately. It is not claimed, however, that attention is always successful, nor that it is always the only moral requirement. First, while attention mainly depends on the subject, there can be limitations to it that are to an extent outside the subject's control (for example, some deep-seated bias pervading the society one grows up in may, *in some cases*, be extremely hard to identify and overcome; or internal limitations, like mental disorders, may prevent attention); in those cases, it is helpful to be able to rely on other forms of moral reasoning, appealing for example to logic and universal principles. Secondly, because attention

depends on the faculties and character traits of the individual, which are developed and sharpened over time, it is helpful to be able to test one's perceptions by moving beyond attention. In both these cases, judgment and deliberation come to the aid of an imperfect ability to attend. Thirdly, it is also possible that some moral difficulties encompass so many problems and contexts that, while the exercise of attention in each of them is crucial, the overall understanding will need to rely on other ways to evaluate the various aspects against each other.

What has been offered, therefore, is not a theory of morality, in the shape of an exhaustive picture of what the correct moral attitude is. Murdoch is clear about the dangers of totalising theories, as well as about the importance of other forms of moral thinking, like utilitarian considerations and the concept of duty. Rather, what I have offered, drawing on Murdoch, is, firstly, a reminder of what lies at the basis of various kinds of moral thinking, and secondly, an account of how much moral work *can* be done by being in a maximally receptive state of mind and so letting the object or situation fully strike one.

Because it focuses on clarifying an important idea of Murdoch's and examining some of its implications, I consider this work to be making a dual contribution, to Murdoch studies and to moral philosophy more broadly. Murdochian scholarship has been dominated by Maria Antonaccio's monographs (2000, 2012), which, however excellent, at times read more like a description of Murdoch's thought than an attempt to grapple with it. This also appears to be the case with Antonaccio's interpretation of Murdoch as a 'reflexive realist'. While this definition, whereby the reality of the Good is captured by the mind as it reflects on itself, is meant to reconcile the two apparently jarring aspects of Murdoch's thought I have discussed, i.e. the realism about value and the transcendental nature of value, it does so at the expense of Murdoch's commitment to a moral reality *outside* the self, and thus does not properly account for attention being, in Murdoch's own description, 'directed outward, away from the self' (SG 66). Because Antonaccio's first book (2000) was the first monograph on Murdoch's philosophy, and because of its comprehensive nature, it has been taken as standard (e.g. Widdows 2006), although the view it presents has recently been criticised (cf. Robjant 2011a). In Chapter 2, I have explained the reasons for rejecting reflexive realism and offered a different way to understand the two aspects of Murdoch's metaphysics, which can be more faithful to Murdoch's moral realism. Therefore, this work offers an

alternative picture of Murdoch's metaphysics, which can be included in future debates. A second contribution to Murdoch scholarship is the analysis of Murdoch's moral psychology, in particular in relation to her central concept of attention. There, too, some suggestions were made to either fill in the gaps that Murdoch leaves open or spell out what she does not fully specify. The suggestions I made relate to two main ideas: first, the reasons for considering attention as a moral concept, in Chapters 3 and 4; second, the way in which the selfless or 'unselfing' nature of attention can be accommodated within a view of morality centred around the individual, which also involves specifying how one is to practise attention, in Chapters 6 and 7.

If the picture that I have developed from Murdoch's framework is correct, some of its key aspects, such as her non-standard type of moral realism, and her views about the conceptual and evaluative nature of thought and perception, will help to identify an alternative (but not exclusive) epistemological and metaphysical picture, and as such can contribute to moral philosophy more broadly. This is a picture which is being increasingly influential in its various ramifications: see Williams (1985) on thick concepts; McDowell (2001) on thick concepts and the objectivity of value; Putnam (1992) on a non-metaphysical realism, Taylor (1989) on the importance of the self; Diamond (2001) on the scope of moral thought and the practise of moral philosophy; and Nussbaum (1990) on the role of virtue in perception and understanding. A second contribution to moral philosophical debates concerns more specifically the central idea of the thesis, i.e. the suggestion that particular states of minds and the exercise of certain faculties may result in a change of moral understanding and moral responses, and that the exercise of attention, as defined in this thesis, can occasion better moral understanding and responses. In moral disagreement, the suggestion is that besides giving reasons and applying principles, what needs to be attempted is to change someone's perception of the situation, by encouraging attention, which includes highlighting certain aspects, questioning possible bias or self-protective desires, encouraging emotional presence, as well as imaginative identification where appropriate. Moreover, the picture on which the notion of attention rests has good explanatory power. It can explain radical moral disagreement, where rational argument and reason giving does not seem to resolve the difficulty; and it can also explain how one can change one's mind about a moral situation after undergoing certain experiences, which may

encourage or demand one's attention, or draw it to different aspects, so that the situation presents itself in a new light.

Since my focus has been on clarifying and developing Murdoch's position, I have therefore not sought to evaluate her moral framework against prominent and fundamentally different competitors. Nevertheless, it is worth touching on three common criticisms because, on analysis, these can be seen to be based on a misunderstanding of Murdoch's model. The first, often addressed to Murdoch (for ex. Clarke (2012) and Blum (2012)), is that her model is too individualistic, placing the whole burden of moral improvement and moral error on the individual's inner life. While it is true that the emphasis for moral change is laid on the individual, the process also benefits from triangulating one's perceptions with other people's, as well as from analysing the impact that social factors, such as particular narratives, may have on one's consciousness, informing one's perceptions (I address this worry briefly in Chapters 5 and 6); for these reasons, individual change does not exclude sharing and participating into a broader moral awareness. Moreover, attention, as I have stressed, is not exhaustive, and accommodates other, less individualistic, paths to moral change.

The second objection is that of over-demandingness: the scope of inner states, knowledge and attitudes is much broader than the scope of action, so if the burden of morality is moved back to consciousness, the scope of personal responsibility is significantly broadened. In other words, on this view, one is morally responsible not only for what one does or fails to do, but for how and what one thinks and perceives, or fails to. In addition, it is very difficult to delimit which states of minds, perceptions and thoughts are morally relevant, because on this view it cannot be specified in principle, and consciousness is seen as a coherent whole with interconnected parts ("But are you saying that every single second has a moral tag?" Yes, roughly' (MGM 495)). If one's moral quality depends on one's inner life, and if the inner life or consciousness is shaped by the 'daily, hourly, minutely' (MGM 193) direction of attention, as Murdoch claims, it follows that there are no resting places for the moral life. Yet, while it is true that the focus on attention makes morality more demanding than a morality centred on action, the kind of demand involved is different, consisting more of small but constant shifts of focus and self-examination, rather than more active exertions of will (although at times it is that too); as Simone Weil defines it, attention is a passive activity.

Lastly, the claims about the place of the concepts used in perception within a community of concept-users can call up the threat of relativism. Although I presented these claims as being about the human community, it is true that some concepts are inescapably relative to a smaller community or culture. My suggestion (in Chapter 5) has been that we understand these concepts as having a kernel that is driven by reality, and then adapted in different ways according to context. There is, however, no infallible test to prove conclusively that concepts are driven by reality rather than top-down from the interests of the community. While I do not claim to have avoided the possibility of relativism, the role of attention itself, as the maximal receptivity and ‘unselfing’ which puts the individual in the best possible position to perceive clearly, can be claimed to be universal. Attention itself, independently of the culture and the difficulties derived from it, can work in all individuals as the prerequisite for correct moral perception and understanding, providing the possibility for it, but not guaranteeing it.

In closing, I wish to mention a number of potential avenues for future research that are suggested by this thesis. Some of these arise from questions that I have not been able to address in as much detail as I would have liked. First among these is the idea of ‘necessity’ which, for Murdoch and Weil, springs from a maximally attentive apprehension of an object or situation. The motivational internalism that is part of the idea of attention finds its highest expression in the experience of being forced by reality to respond in a particular way. This seems to be created by a complete investment of thought and emotion in the object of attention, so that the whole individual is ‘pulled’ by the reality it sees. This experience is individual: in an empirical sense, and from an outsider’s perspective, it is obvious that there are other possibilities open. The necessity involved includes the exercise of the will, which however appears bound in one direction. Weil expresses this through her notion of ‘obedience’, where the will conforms to the only choice it has, to obey the order of the world. Harry Frankfurt (1988, 1999) has explored a very similar idea through his notion of ‘volitional necessity’. A comparison with Murdoch and Weil may reveal new dimension of this difficult idea.

Questions relating to the proper use of the will in attention, together with the difficulty of placing the role of the self and with the requirement to be selfless, link Murdoch with Eastern philosophical thought and particularly with Buddhist

traditions. While Murdoch once calls herself a 'Buddhist Christian' (MGM 419), care must be taken not to draw too close a parallel and be mindful of the different contexts. However, the related ideas of attention and unselfing are also, strikingly, at the heart of Buddhist teachings, where the practise of meditation (which Murdoch recommended should be taught in schools) consists in selfless attention to an external reality. The connections are also reinforced by Murdoch's appreciation of Schopenhauer, in relation to his emphasis on justice and compassion being the best virtues, and the importance of contemplation in the face of a destructive will (see MGM Chapter 3). Weil's own thoughts about attention and the self were also nourished by close readings of the Bhagavad Gita. The parallels as well as differences between Murdoch's idea of attention and Buddhism can constitute a fruitful avenue of exploration. Peter Conradi's (2004) account of his conversion to Buddhism in connection with his friendship with Murdoch can be a helpful starting point.

Because this thesis offers an exploration of a particular way to think about morality in general, in the form of attitudes and faculties of moral perception and understanding, the overall picture can be used to examine particular questions in morality. In this way, it can constitute a basis for explorations in applied ethics. For example, questions in animal ethics, which have been implicitly in the back of my mind while writing this work, can be asked again while urging a different approach to non-human animals, which is not based on the identification of their capacities and of criteria for moral considerability, but based on the kinds of perceptions and responses that follow the exercise of attention as described here. This kind of approach is starting to raise interest thanks to the work of Cora Diamond (2001d, 2008), Cavell (2008), Wolfe (2008), J.M. Coetzee (1999) and, more recently and more explicitly, Elisa Aaltola (2012), the latter stressing the importance of intersubjectivity and empathy in thinking morally about non-human animals, and suggesting that moral concern for non-human animals changes depending on how closely we come into contact with them.

A great part of my exploration of attention belongs to moral psychology. Differently from much work in moral psychology, Murdoch's approach includes little empirical scientific evidence. However, the study of attention as a moral concept could be buttressed by empirical psychological experiments. For instance, the claim that exercising attention, in the sense defined here, changes one's moral

understanding and moral responses, can be tested through empirical experiments. Empirical psychological evidence could also help to justify Murdoch's claims about the role of the self and of the ego in directing consciousness and desire, and in particular the claim, central for Murdoch's argument, that most of the distortions that occur in perception and understanding are caused, directly or indirectly, by self-directed focus, which creates fantasy through projection.

These possible avenues indicate that this thesis can be taken as an initial exploration of the role of attention in morality, grounded in Murdoch's thought and developed from it. Because this work is an overview of the idea of attention in its various aspects, many of the ideas presented can be expanded and developed. What I hope to have provided, however, is a perspicuous presentation and development of Murdoch's concept of attention, and some reasons derived from it to regard attention as important in morality.

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