

The Individual in Pursuit of the Individual; *A Murdochian Account of Moral Perception*

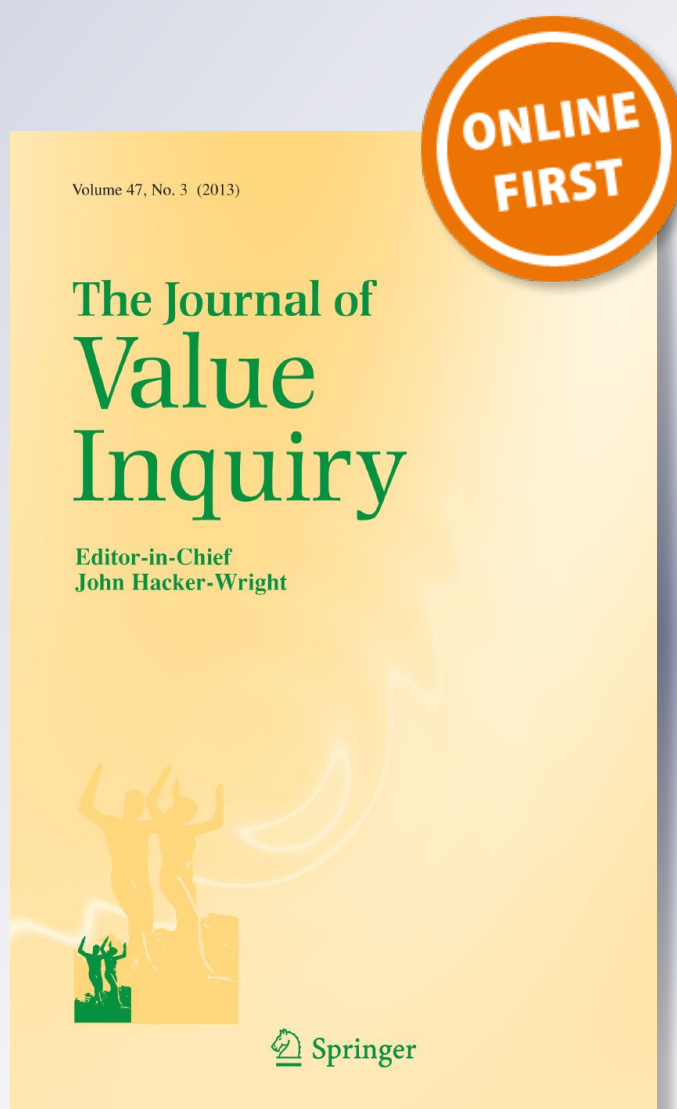
Evgenia Mylonaki

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The Individual in Pursuit of the Individual; A Murdochian Account of Moral Perception

Evgenia Mylonaki¹ 

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1 Introduction

In a number of articles John McDowell defends the appearance that evaluative thought in general involves a distinct sensitivity to aspects of the world.^{1,2} This sensitivity, McDowell thinks, constitutes the ground of moral thought and moral knowledge in particular.³ Moral thinking, on this Aristotelian view, is not a matter of deriving conclusions about what ought to be done from premises stating universal moral truths or rules, for human affairs are irreducibly varied and situational and the human good is uncodifiable. The question *How should one live* can only be answered by the agent who has the capacity to single out occasion by occasion that feature of the situation which engages with the right concern for the circumstances. It is this singling out which is conceived of as a distinct sensitivity to aspects of reality, and which is explained as the virtuous agent's susceptibility to reasons for

¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), p. 41.

² See John McDowell, "Values and Secondary Qualities," in John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); John McDowell, "Some Issues in Aristotle's Moral Psychology," in John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); John McDowell, J. "Projection and Truth in Ethics," in John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); John McDowell, J. (1979), "Virtue and reason," in John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

³ See David Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Reason," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 76 (1975–1976): 29–51.

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✉ Evgenia Mylonaki
evg.mylonaki@gmail.com
<http://www.evgeniamylonaki.com>

¹ University of Athens, Athens, Greece

acting; what McDowell calls *moral perception*. Moral perception is thus the focal point of an alternative, Aristotelian account of moral knowledge.

Now, one may or may not want to buy this Aristotelian account wholesale, but one may, nevertheless, want to retain a place for moral perception in one's view of moral knowledge. One may, for instance, think that there are several ways in which claims to moral knowledge can be grounded: by inference from other knowledge (moral or otherwise), by testimony, but also by moral perception. The question of moral perception arises for this view as well. To be more precise, it arises for any account of moral knowledge, which posits a perceptual sensitivity to reasons as one of its grounds. We understand how one may be perceptually susceptible to properties of objects such as shapes, textures, weights, colors, etc. and so we may take perception, ordinarily conceived to constitute the ground of much of our knowledge of the world. But we find it very difficult to see how one may be perceptually susceptible to such things as rational grounds or reasons and so we have difficulty accepting the very idea of moral perception. We may summarize the difficulty thus:

The Question of Moral Perception: How is it possible to be susceptible to such things as rational grounds or reasons in the way we are susceptible to shapes, textures, weights, colors, etc., if the former do not seem to be properties of objects in the way that the latter are.

A family of answers —*object views* for short— bites the bullet. On their picture, moral perception is the sensitivity to a distinctive (moral) set of properties in the world; properties which are intelligible independently of any reference to this sensitivity.⁴ On McDowell's alternative —*reasons view* for short— the sensitivity of moral perception should be modeled on the sensitivity that grounds perceptual knowledge of *secondary* qualities of objects; qualities that are not intelligible independently of their disposition to present a perceiver with a certain perceptual appearance; in the case of moral perception, with a certain *reason for acting*.

Both of these answers model the explanation of moral perception on the sensitivity to properties that grounds knowledge by perception of objects. But it is the aim of this paper to sketch an alternative answer to the question of moral perception. On the proposed answer, what one is sensitive to in moral perception can be known only if it is apprehended as *the reality of another individual*. This move defuses the question of moral perception, for it rejects its hidden premise: that one may be sensitive to such things as rational connections only in the way one is sensitive to objects. But the suggested account raises a new set of questions: What is it to know the reality of another individual? And how may be preserve talk of sensitivity as grounding this knowledge? I believe that an answer to these questions can be found in Iris Murdoch's distinctive account of attention.

⁴ See J. C. Wright, "The Role of Moral Perception in Mature Moral Agency" in J. J. Wisniewski (ed.) *Moral Perception* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 1–24; J. J. Winiewski, "The Case for Moral Perception," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 14 (1) (2015): 129–148; R. Cowan, "Perceptual Intuitionism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 90 (2015), 164–193; A. Cullison, "Moral Perception," *European Journal of Philosophy*, 18 (2) (2009): 159–175; R. Audi, "Moral Perception and Moral Knowledge," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 84 (2010): 79–97; J. P. McBrayer, "A Limited Defense of Moral Perception," *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 149, No 3(2010): 305–320.

The structure of the paper is the following: The second section is an elucidation of the topic of moral perception. In the third section I rely on Iris Murdoch's famous example of M and D in order to register a dissatisfaction with McDowell's view. This dissatisfaction arises out of consideration of Murdoch's injunction to suppress the self in order to perceive what is true. In the sections that follow I attempt to sketch an alternative, Murdochian account of moral perception. In particular, in the fourth section I give a non-moralist interpretation of the injunction to suppress the self as what we need to do in order to realize the individual reality of another individual. In the fifth section I examine the very idea of an individual reality by turning to its paradigmatic instance: the reality of an other human. It turns out that this reality is historical and particular through and through. In section six I suggest that the radically historical character of individual realities in general is what motivates Murdoch to turn to the metaphors of vision in order to elucidate the ground of moral knowledge. In the seventh section I briefly go over Murdoch's use of visual metaphors in the exposition of her account of moral perception. These metaphors enable her to explain the sensitivity to the historical reality of an individual in terms of the image making ability of a particular, historical consciousness. To say that this ability is cognitive, Murdoch thinks, is to say that it is oriented towards the good. In section eight I explain why this is so and thereby complete the sketch of an alternative Murdochian account of moral perception. In the conclusion, I spell out how this Murdochian account deals with the question of moral perception and overcomes the limitations of McDowell's neo-Aristotelian view.

2 The Topic of Moral Perception

Consider the following claims: "I know that one ought to speak up for the rights of the oppressed, because [I know that] one ought to fight injustice and that oppression is a form of injustice." "I know that experimenting with mice is monstrous, because [studies show or I am being told that] mice have a sense of self." "I know that what the kids are doing to the cat is cruel, because [I can see] that the cat is in pain." We are dealing here with three claims to knowledge and three different kinds of "because" or different ways of grounding a claim to knowledge. We could say that the first is the "because" of inference, the second is the "because" of testimony and the third is the "because" of moral perception. In all three cases the "because" states the ground or reason of a claim to knowledge. The topic of moral perception depends on our finding a way to claim for it a *distinctive* place in the grounding of such knowledge claims. But why speak of *knowledge claims* when it is the grounding of *knowledge* we are interested in? The reason is that all knowledge is potentially — however implicitly this may be — expressible in knowledge claims.⁵ And, hence, that the grounds of knowledge are grounds of knowledge claims. That is, grounds

⁵ The discussion on this in epistemology is notorious but this is not the place to argue for this assumption.

which are not intelligible as such from a point of view external to the perspective of the knower.

Of course, one may know an aspect of reality — and so the “because” of grounds — without being able to fully articulate this knowledge. For instance, my poorly educated grandmother may know that what the kids are doing to the cat is cruel way without being able to fully articulate this knowledge. She may be the kind of person who treats animals with respect, who gets angry when confronted with disrespectful or cruel behavior towards animals, and who may in the circumstances of the example say such things as “You shouldn’t be snatching the cat’s tail in this way, don’t you see? - She is a living being too!” But, despite all this, she may be unable to say of herself what a philosopher might say: “What grounds her knowledge that what the kids are doing to the cat is cruel, is her perception of the cat’s pain.” This inability notwithstanding, a philosopher’s explanation of my grandmother’s knowledge makes sense only against the background of her ability to say such things as: “She is a living being too, I don’t understand what has gotten to them, treating the cat with such cruelty.” But this is so only because saying such things is a way of *expressing* her knowledge in the circumstances and thus making a knowledge claim. If my grandmother said, “They shouldn’t be snatching her tail in that way” and upon asked “Why?” could only say, “I have no idea,” we should think either that something has gone wrong (for instance, that she knew but in the interim had an accident and forgot) or that she is here obliquely referring to an intuition as her ground. To be able in response to the question “Why?” to say such things as “Can’t you see? She is a living being too” just is to be able to give a ground for her knowledge claim, albeit in a way that is, perhaps, not fully explicit. The assumption I making here is that knowing involves consciousness —however implicit and inarticulate— of what grounds claims to knowledge *as such*. Now what grounds this knowledge may be inference from other bits of knowledge, testimony, moral perception, etc., and one may not be aware of the grounds under this specification; i.e., *as* inference from other bits of knowledge, *as* testimony, *as* moral perception, etc. But, surely, one does not need to be a philosopher to know and claim to know something in either of these ways. Given this assumption, the first thing we may say about the topic of moral perception is this: to advance a conception of moral perception in moral epistemology is to suppose that it makes sense to talk of a sensitivity to aspects of the world as the ground of (claims to) moral knowledge.

But this is not sufficient to delineate the topic of moral perception. For one may think that it is possible to know a bit of moral reality by seeing in the ordinary sense of the term that things are thus and so and thinking, in a further act of the mind, that things’ being thus and so is one’s reason for claiming to know that bit of moral reality. On this view, seeing would be an act of ordinary perception and the awareness of what is thus seen as one’s reason would be a further cognitive act. But this would in effect be to deny that moral knowledge can be grounded in a sensitivity to aspects of reality, except in a secondary sense. For in this case, the true ground of moral knowledge would be inference from other knowledge; say in the example of the cat above, knowledge that one ought not to inflict pain on sentient beings.

To posit a sensitivity to aspects of the world as a *distinctive* ground of moral knowledge then, one would have to place the awareness of (what one is sensitive

to as) one's reason for making a knowledge claim within this very sensitivity. In other words, one would have to explain that it is our sensitivity to aspects of the world *alone* that which may ground moral knowledge. No further thing (such as knowledge of a rule or general truth) needs to be added and so no inference needs to get started. In this distinctive sensitivity, we may find all that the concept of a ground of knowledge contains: both the reason why one makes the knowledge claim and the consciousness of this reason as a reason. The topic of moral perception, thus, depends on the fate of the claim that (at least some of) our moral knowledge is grounded in our self-conscious sensitivity to (aspects of reality as) grounds (and not, say, in our inference from other bits of knowledge) of moral knowledge. On this conception, there are no two distinct seeings in the example. To see that the cat is in pain in the way of moral perception *just is* to be conscious of this seeing or what is thereby seen as a reason for making a knowledge claim and thus as the ground of knowledge if the claim is indeed legitimate.

So that we may rephrase the claim "I know that the kids are cruel to the cat because I can see that she is in pain" by saying: "I know that the kids are cruel to the cat – How do you know? I can just see *why*; if you pay attention, you'll see it too: she is in pain." But if in seeing *that the cat is in pain* one sees *why (one knows that) what the kids are doing is cruel*, then we must suppose that in this seeing one is sensitive to such things as grounds and rational relations. To put the point more generally, to advance a view of moral perception is to advance a conception of our sensitivity to aspects of the world as a sensitivity to grounds and rational relations. But if what one is sensitive to in moral perception is rational relations, then it is hard to see how rational relations may be found in the world in *something like* or in *something other* than the way in which objects of perception, ordinarily conceived, are found in the world. This, I take it, is the question of moral perception.

3 A Murdochian Complaint Against the Reasons-View of Moral Perception

I said in the introduction that one way to answer the question of moral perception is to bite the bullet, in the way that the object views do. On this picture, in moral perception one is sensitive to normative properties of things in the world that are brutally there; i.e., intelligible independently of the way they appear to us. For instance, one could say in the example above that in being sensitive to the pain of the cat one is sensitive to an intrinsic normative feature (say the wrongness of making a sentient being suffer), such that if one tracks it as one should, one will thereby know that the kids shouldn't be doing what they are doing. But this, McDowell argues, is to fall into the trap of an intolerable intuitionism in moral epistemology: the need to posit a faculty about which all that we can say is that it tracks objective rational connections in the world.⁶ We can avoid this trap, he thinks, if we model what is known in moral perception on the perception of secondary properties: properties which are

⁶ McDowell, *op. cit.*

not intelligible independently of their disposition to present the knower with a certain appearance. And this is possible if we conceive of moral perception as a certain susceptibility to reasons: the virtuous agent's susceptibility to reasons for action.

To be aware of a reason for action in general is to be aware of a feature of a situation as giving someone a reason for acting. But this, McDowell notes, should not be thought of as implying that reasons are subjective as opposed to veridical. That a feature of a situation may be such as to give one reason to act need not mean that whether there is a reason or not in the circumstances will depend on whether one will happen to see a feature of the situation as reason giving. It means that one will not see the situation as it is unless one sees that feature as reason giving.⁷ The dependence of the object of perception on the knower in this case is not such as to relativize the knowledge; it is such as to invite a different understanding of the object of knowledge. The object of knowledge, McDowell thinks, need not be seen as being brutally there. In non-moral cases as well, say the perception of colors, it makes sense to speak of knowledge of objects whose status as objects is not intelligible independently of their disposition to present the knower with a certain appearance.⁸ Thus, on McDowell's view, the rational or grounding relations one is sensitive to in moral perception are there in the way that the secondary properties of objects of ordinary perception are there. For the rational or grounding relations at issue are no more than reasons for action.

In the cat example, for instance, to truly see why what the kids are doing is cruel is to see why one ought to intervene and save the cat from this gratuitous suffering. Moral perception is, on this picture, a species of *practical* knowledge; knowledge of reasons for acting. To see things as they are is a matter of having one's motivational and cognitive apparatus be in a state such that certain considerations will appear as reasons for acting a certain way and thereby silence considerations, which might in other circumstances constitute reasons for acting otherwise. The kind of person one is, the sort of considerations one can come to see as reasons, that is, will be of paramount importance in determining whether one sees things as they are or not.⁹ To come to see things as they are is, thus, a matter of recognizing in this sense features of one's circumstances as calling for action. And this is a matter of recognizing rational relations as part of the fabric of these circumstances. This recognition, McDowell thinks, we can unproblematically understand in perceptual terms if we broaden our understanding of perception ordinarily conceived to include perception of secondary qualities (perception of qualities whose concept contains their perceptibility) and if we appreciate the fact that the recognition of features of one's circumstances as calling for action is not the momentary activation of one's intellectual powers, but the result of the proper molding of both one's cognitive and conative abilities.

Moral perception is indeed, as McDowell suggests, a sensitivity to aspects of the world; a sensitivity which constitutes a distinctive ground of moral knowledge. But

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

if we conceive of this sensitivity in terms of reasons for acting and leave it at that, then we risk obscuring an important motivation for wanting to posit a certain sensitivity as the ground of moral knowledge. McDowell thinks that human affairs are such that the issue of the good human life is not codifiable in universal terms. And for this reason, he thinks that knowledge in ethics cannot be a matter of deductively deriving knowledge of the particular from knowledge of the general, but a matter of being the kind of person who can see —occasion by occasion— what feature of one's circumstances calls for action. The issue of moral knowledge, as McDowell rightly sees, is not the issue of seeing how to derive action from thought. The model of derivation (practical syllogism) is, indeed, no more than a model; an account which lays bare the rational structure of action with a view to eudaimonia. It is not a recipe or a guideline for producing actions that are right. But the issue of moral knowledge is not merely a matter of laying out the rational structure of eudaimonic action either. It is a question of clarifying the activity of cognizing an *individual* reality (a reality graspable in historical and non universalizable concepts) and not an *object* (a reality graspable in universal terms). As the Aristotelians also point out, the good human life is not codifiable in universal terms. But this is because it is an individual reality. Thus, the motivation for positing moral perception as the ground of moral knowledge has to do with the uncodifiability of individual realities in general and not merely the reality of the human good. It is the activity of cognizing these realities that moral perception consists in. This, I believe, is the activity Iris Murdoch has in mind when she talks of *attention* and *love* in *The Sovereignty of Good*¹⁰ and elsewhere in her work and this is the activity I plan to focus on in the remaining of this paper. Before I do so, though, I need to say more about my dissatisfaction with McDowell's account of moral perception.

Jennifer Wright registers a similar complaint with McDowell's account.¹¹ She takes Harman's much discussed example of seeing a group of young hoodlums pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it and argues that we should not conceive of moral perception as so tightly knit with the concept of a reason for action.¹² In such a case, she is thinking, it is possible to perceive the wrongness of what the boys do without being clear "as to whether it gives you reason to act or what the right action in response to the perceived situation would be."¹³ But these cases cannot trouble McDowell. For if it is indeed not clear whether the aspect of the world one is sensitive to in moral perception presents the agent with a certain reason for acting, then, McDowell can respond, it is not clear whether the aspect of the world under consideration is knowable in moral perception to begin with. The cases which might give McDowell pause are ones in which one is sensitive to what presents itself as transcending the perceiver's practical concerns and which we would like to count as cases of moral perception *precisely for this reason*.

¹⁰ Murdoch, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Wright *op. cit.*

¹² Gilbert, Harman, *The Nature of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 4.

¹³ Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

We have such a case, I believe, in Iris Murdoch's famous example of a mother-in-law M who struggles with her conception of her daughter-in-law D. This example, Murdoch thinks, ensures that "whatever is in question as *happening* happens entirely in M's mind."¹⁴ M, who feels that "her son her married beneath him", at first finds D good-hearted but "while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement", but because M is "a correct person" she behaves impeccably towards D.¹⁵ Later on, though, because M is not merely "correct" but also "an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object that confronts her" and as a result of her *looking* she comes to *rightly* find D "not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on"¹⁶. Throughout this period, there is no change in M's actions; her behavior towards D remains the same. But, M is active throughout: she is changing her mind about D as a result of giving just and careful attention to her. And it is this activity, Murdoch thinks, which is the moral cognitive activity *par excellence*.

Now, of course, McDowell's reasons account of moral perception is an account of M's ability to see D clearly. And, although Murdoch does not tire of stressing that we should move away from the image of action towards the image of vision in order to understand moral activity, we can take her insistence as her rejection of an impoverished conception of agency — say a conception of agency in terms of what one ought or is obliged to do — in favor of a deeper one — say one in terms of what is good to be. And in fact Murdoch's work in *The Sovereignty of Good* is explicitly set out to as an attack on an impoverished conception of agency.¹⁷ But, for McDowell the concept of seeing or being sensitive to a bit of reality in the way that grounds moral knowledge is the concept of a certain susceptibility to reasons for action; for the concept of moral knowledge is on his picture not intelligible except in terms of the concept of a certain kind of *life*; the virtuous agent's *active pursuit of eudaimonia*. But for Murdoch the concept of seeing a bit of reality in the way that grounds moral knowledge is intelligible independently of the conceptual repertoire of action.

¹⁴ Murdoch, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁵ Murdoch, *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Murdoch, *op. cit.* McDowell takes Murdoch to be an ally. (McDowell, *op. cit.*, p. 72). Other interpreters also assume that Murdoch espouses a reasons-view of moral perception. See B. Clarke, "Iris Murdoch and the Prospects for Critical Moral Perception," in J. Brookes, (ed.) *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 323; E. Millgram, "Murdoch, Practical Reasoning, and Particularism," *Notizie di Politeia* (2002): 64–87; R. Moran, "Iris Murdoch and Existentialism," in J. Brookes, (ed.) *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): pp. 181–197; K. Setiya, "Murdoch on the Sovereignty of Good," *Philosopher's Imprint* 13 (2013): 1–21. In many ways Murdoch is indeed an ally. But there is a deep difference between the two accounts. For an alternative take on the matter see R. Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," in M. Antonaccio, and W. Schweiker, (ed.) *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996): pp. 3–29. My interpretation of Murdoch's concept of attention owes a great debt to Taylor.

¹⁷ "I would not be understood, either, as suggesting that insight or pureness of heart are more important than action: the thing which philosophers feared Moore for implying. Overt actions are perfectly obviously important in themselves, and important too because they are the indispensable pivot and spur of the inner sense." (Murdoch *op. cit.*, p. 42).

The example of M and D is not meant to serve the role of providing merely *one* case of moral perception. It is supposed to present the reader of the *Sovereignty* with *the* case of moral perception itself, as opposed to an alternative Murdoch says she considered but rejected: the case of ritual, “wherein the inner consent appears to be the real act.”¹⁸ Moral perception, Murdoch thinks, is, like ritual, a kind of activity that is intelligible in its own right. This activity is, of course, intimately tied to action, for action is part of what affects it and changes its course. But the concept of this activity does not contain the concept of action within it. To stress this Murdoch imagines that the D of the example is dead and so there is nothing that M can do in the sense of doing that has to do with reasons for action and actions. Still, Murdoch is thinking, there is something that M can be said to be doing, on a conception of doing to be analyzed throughout the *Sovereignty* without reference to action concepts.¹⁹

But, it might be said, the example is artificially limited to conditions in which the question what to do does not arise. But this objection misses the point. Murdoch would be the first to admit that the example is artificially limited. Her point is not to deny that action and the activity in question are in the typical case to be found together, but that the activity in question is inner and distinctive (i.e. intelligible independently of the conceptual repertoire of action). But this is not all there is to it either. I believe that part of the reason why she is choosing the case of moral perception as opposed to the case of ritual is that she wants to help us see a further point: M’s attending to the reality of D counts as an instance of *moral perception precisely because* D is taken in this perception as intelligible independently of anything that has to do with M’s concerns with her self; thus, also her concerns with what life to live and what reasons for acting the circumstances might present. This comes out most clearly in the following strand of thought in Murdoch’s work: the ability to see things as they are is the ability to “face reality.”²⁰ The task is difficult because reality is difficult.²¹ “...Human beings cannot face much reality,” Murdoch notes at the end of the *Sovereignty*.²² Carrying out this task, facing reality, is no simple affair; it requires effort. But things are not hopeless; facing reality and thus coming to exhibit fact has its own technique.²³ Attention is this technique in its positive description and suppressing the self is this technique in its negative description. A non-moralist interpretation of the negative specification of the technique of exhibiting fact points towards an alternative interpretation of attention, on which M’s attending to the reality of D counts as an instance of *moral perception precisely because* D is taken in this perception as intelligible independently of anything that has to do with M’s concerns with her self; and so also with M’s concern with what to do and what to be. It

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²¹ See C. Diamond “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” *Partial Answers* 1:2 (2003): 1–26.

²² Murdoch, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

²³ Murdoch, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

is the appreciation of this point that opens the way for a more ambitious account of moral perception than the one McDowell attempts to give.

To clarify this line of thinking I go on to give in the next section a non-moralist interpretation of Murdoch's talk of suppressing the self. This will open the way for a Murdochian account of moral perception.

4 The Suppression of the Self

For Murdoch, knowledge by moral perception is not moral because it knows an aspect of reality that is moral.²⁴ Rather, an aspect of reality can be revealed to us because the exercise of our cognitive abilities may itself be a moral achievement.²⁵ Of course there are other modes of being moral; but the fundamental one is that which qualifies the being of consciousness itself. As Murdoch herself beautifully puts it: "There are 'moral judgments', which may in some ways resemble judgments in law courts, or which take place at stated times and initiate clearly visible new course of action or the embryos or new dispositions. But there are also ways and states in which value inheres in consciousness, morality colours an outlook, light penetrates a darkness. We have senses of direction and absolute checks. There are qualities of consciousness."²⁶ For Murdoch, consciousness consists in "a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of the self."²⁷ But what is the suppression of the self? And why is it the ability to perceive what is true?

On the reading shared by most interpreters, the "suppression of the self" is the ability to perceive what is true because human nature is morally bad (selfish, egocentric, etc.). Now there is no doubt that Murdoch herself uses this language to describe human nature.²⁸ But she nowhere says that the suppression of the self is a technique for exhibiting fact *because the self is morally bad*. To say this would not only commit her to the kind of moralism she takes great pains to avoid but also to slide into a conception of morality as regarding a special domain of facts. For if, on this reading, the suppression of the self is required for the perception of what is real *merely* because the self is morally bad, then what is real is *ipso facto* identified with a special domain

²⁴ "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." (Murdoch *op. cit.*, p. 95).

²⁵ "I want there to be a discussable problem of consciousness because I want to talk about consciousness or self-being as the fundamental mode or form of moral being." (Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), p. 171.)

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

²⁷ Murdoch, 1970, p. 64.

²⁸ Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 239–240; Bagnoli Bagnoli, C. (2012), "The Exploration of Moral Life", in J. Brookes, (ed.) *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 218; L. A. Blum, "Iris Murdoch and the Domain of the Moral," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (1986): 343–367, p. 362; E. Millgram "Kantian crystallization," *Ethics*, 114 (2004): 511–513, p. 78; etc. For an exception see Moran, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

of facts: facts about what is morally good. The point here is not that moral reality is not the reality that has to do with the good in some way; Murdoch herself would be the first to deny this. The point is that *the good* does not serve as what individuates a domain of facts; i.e., as the subject matter of a certain knowledge and thought in the way that *the plant* serves as the subject matter of botanical thought and knowledge.²⁹ Murdoch does indeed take a pessimistic view of human beings. And she does think that the self is naturally selfish and egocentric. But she thinks that the suppression of the self is a technique for exhibiting fact because the self's selfish and egocentric character —what she also calls *the fantasy of the self*— stands in the way of realizing the separateness and the difference of the other and not because it is morally bad and should be emptied, negated or transcended.³⁰ In fact, as Christopher Nole and Richard Moran note in discussing this, to carry out the cognitive task Murdoch speaks of we need all the resources we can master.³¹

What Murdoch thinks is that there is an apprehension of what is true which is vulnerable to a peculiar danger: the danger of obscuring the irreducibly distinct reality of what is perceived. Our simple everyday (non-artistic) ability to see colors, let's say, is vulnerable to a variety of ways in which things could go wrong: one could mistake a shade of red for another, one could mistake a bit of red for green, and so on and so forth. But it makes little sense to say that one could mistake the reality of a shade of red for the reality of one's concern for oneself and one's life; at least not in the typical case, say, not unless we are talking about an artist's life with red. In the case Murdoch has in mind, though, the ability of moral perception is subject to precisely this danger: M mistakes D's reality for the reality of the prospects of her son in society, which is the reality of one of M's concerns with her own life. M's mistake is that she does not let the reality of D present itself "as it is": that is, independently of even her concerns with what is the best way to live. Murdoch describes M's change of mind as a change from considering D in the light of M's own concerns to considering D in her own light. It is when M says, "Let me look again" and means "Let me not stand in the way of looking at D" that M begins to overcome the fantasy of the self.

In this case the fantasy of the self is M's anxious preoccupation with her family's social status ("M feels that her son has married beneath him"³²). In another case it could be one's self-consoling thoughts ("No-one is hiring me because I'm better

²⁹ See C. Diamond, "We Are Perpetually Moralists: Iris Murdoch, Fact, and Value," in M. Antonaccio and W. Schweiker (eds.) *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 79–110.

³⁰ Murdoch talks of "the fat relentless ego" (Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), p. 51), of "personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandising and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one" (*Ibid.*, p. 57). Elsewhere she talks of "fantasy, the proliferation of sliding self-centered aims and images, is itself a powerful system of energy..." (*Ibid.*, p. 65), and finally: "The same virtues, in the end the same virtue (love), are required throughout, and fantasy (self) can prevent us from seeing a blade of grass just as it can prevent us from seeing another person" (*Ibid.*, p. 68). For an illuminating, albeit partial account of this fantasy, see Moran, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

³¹ Moran, *op. cit.* and C. Mole, "Attention, Self and the Sovereignty of the Good" in Anne Rowe (ed.), *Iris Murdoch: A reassessment*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

³² Murdoch, 1970, p. 17.

than everyone and they feel threatened”). In other cases, it could be the constant preoccupation with oneself (“She has not called today, therefore I must have done something to offend her”). In yet other cases it could even be one’s concern for happiness (“I can’t let myself feel miserable about the current state of the world, I have to keep my spirits up”). In all cases, what stands in the way of the realization of the separateness and the difference of the other is the fact that what lies at the center of our preoccupation is the precious self.

We are image-breeding animals, Murdoch thinks. We make the world within which we move and desire in these images.³³ But if all our imaginings have the self at their center, then all the images of the other will in reality be deflected images of our self. To realize the irreducibly distinct reality of the other is immensely difficult both because the appropriation of the reality of the other into our own mental and practical economy can be very handy (it can help us avoid facing very difficult or even insoluble personal issues) and because there are great risks involved in opening ourselves up to the reality of an other. (Consider, for instance, the gradual realization that a philosopher whose work we are very much attached to is a vain and arrogant human being who only cares for their career.) To see the other as one is one must effect the separation of the other in consciousness, and to do so one must suppress the self, or rather dethrone the self from the center of one’s imaginings. But this is not sufficient. One must, Murdoch tells us in a distinctively Platonic move, orient one’s imaginings towards the good. It is the love for the good that enables us to focus our energy away from the self and towards the individual reality of an other. And this is why Murdoch says of love that it is “the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real.”³⁴ I now turn to the business of clarifying all this.

5 The Individual Reality of an Other

I suggested above that the realization of the separate and different reality of the other is threatened by the self’s fantastical tendency to place itself at the center of all thought and knowledge. In a sense where M goes wrong in her original apprehension of D is that the images she makes of D are deflected images of herself. What we find out in the first part of the process is things about M: she worries about the prospects of her son in society; she feels threatened by the lack of decorum in D’s behavior, etc. The change that is affected is a change of what lies in the center of M’s thought: where before it was a disguised version of herself now it is D. If this is right, then the suppression of the self is a technique for exhibiting fact because it is a technique for allowing oneself to realize the separate and different reality of an other.³⁵ But what is that?

³³ “...the continuous detailed conceptual pictorial activity whereby (for better or worse) we make and remake the ‘word’ *within which* our desires and reflections move, and out of which our actions arise.” (Murdoch, 1992, p. 325).

³⁴ Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics, Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (Chatto and Windus: London, 1997), p. 215.

³⁵ See Taylor, *op. cit.* for this metaphor.

The paradigmatic instance of a separate and different reality — the kind of thing to de-center the self — is for Murdoch the reality of another person. Knowledge of an other as a person, she thinks, puts in question a familiar conception of knowledge of an other as the knowledge of objects in the impersonal world of science.³⁶ When describing M's activity of attending to D she says that "the activity in question must remain a highly personal one upon which the price of "the impersonal world of language" is to say the least problematic: or rather it is an activity which puts in question the existence of such an impersonal world."³⁷ But what does it mean to say that this activity puts in question the existence of an impersonal world? I said above that for Murdoch, we, human individuals, are image-breeding animals. We make the world within which we move and desire in those images: "We live normally and naturally by metaphors and picture, some of which are in fairly clear and acceptable ways translatable into less figuratively modes, while others seem 'deep' and resist analysis."³⁸ We are beings with the capacity to determine our conceptions in accordance with how things are in the world — i.e. form beliefs — and the capacity to determine how things are in the world in accordance with our conceptions — i.e. act. But the reality we thus make and the reality we thus face is not intelligible except in terms of the images we make and use in the interim. Consciousness, Murdoch thinks, is not intelligible except in terms of our ability to make images and get to what these images point to and beyond and this all over again. Here is another of her examples: "Don't kill the poor spider, put him out in the garden. Even a use of 'him' or 'her' instead of 'it' may help", she says when speaking of ways of teaching reverence "for life and being, for otherness."³⁹ Here the use of "him" or "her" is the use of an image, an image that is better than the one suggested by the "it", which is an image of neutral, lifeless existence. The use of "him" or "her" frees us from this neutralizing conception of the spider and opens the vista of considering an other's reality. But this is no mere function of teaching. We are always in this situation. In fact, our capacity to understand the world is to a large extent a matter of our capacity to make and use such images. So that our ability to apprehend the truth will depend on the kind of images we make and the kind of images we make will in turn be a matter of our orientation in the word.⁴⁰ Here is how Murdoch herself puts the thought: "This breeding of imagery' is a familiar aspect of our moment-to-moment, minute-to-minute, hour-to-hour 'consciousness, and contributes to giving body to the concept. Our busy minds are (for better or worse) not often empty or idle. Such activity constitutes, in my picture of the matter, a large part of our fundamental moral disposition, it is a function of what we really value, what we love and are magnetised by, and of what we are capable of noticing."⁴¹

If we thus conceive of consciousness, as itself a historical and oriented activity, then we may get at an alternative view of our conceptions. These conceptions can no

³⁶ Murdoch, 1970, p. 25.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁸ Murdoch, 1992, p. 329.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

⁴⁰ "There is a continuous breeding of imagery in the consciousness which is, for better or worse, a function of moral change." *Ibid.*, p. 329.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, P. 330.

longer be conceived of as timeless, static realities, multiply realizable generalities or multiply exemplifiable forms of thought. On the contrary, they have to be conceived of as fully historical realities, tied to the life and the orientation of the person whose conceptions they are. And this puts immediately in question the perspective of the impersonal world of science for the understanding of the reality of another person.⁴² Thus, even the so-called thick moral concepts (“cruel,” “courageous,” etc.) can be conceived of as images of this sort. “Repentance may mean something different to an individual at different times in his life, and what it fully means is a part of his life and cannot be understood except in context.”⁴³ The meaning of a conception in terms of which one makes or faces reality is not intelligible independently of the shape of one’s life, for it is part of the fabric of one’s being. This meaning changes as one’s life changes. For as we live, that is, “as we move and as we look our concepts themselves are changing.”⁴⁴ But this is no *mere* change: “We have a different image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty. A deepening process, at any rate an altering and complicating process, takes place.”⁴⁵ We have a different image of courage at forty not merely because we have exemplified a timeless conception a greater number of times.⁴⁶ On the contrary; we have a deeper image because what was once the rather abstract image of courage has in the course of life been progressively embodied and thereby enriched. We have the capacity to embody an abstract conception (say of justice) and thereby change this abstract conception (say we may march in order to embody our conception of justice as protest, but marching in order to protest may change our conception of justice into more than protesting).

Given all this, one might think that to know the reality of the other one must know the other as a self-determining reality. But this way of thinking of things in response to Murdoch’s work is misleading, however tempting it may be. It evokes the Kantian imagery of knowledge of another person. Thus, for instance, David Velleman tries to give a Kantian account of Murdoch’s conception of attention.⁴⁷ He suggests that what one is sensitive to in moral perception is the very idea of the power of self-determination as it is manifested or incarnated in particular individuals. Velleman believes that it is possible to retain a picture of moral perception as the attention to the particular individual and the Kantian view of moral knowledge as the knowledge of the very idea of a purely rational will as one’s end. But, for Murdoch, this Kantian notion of sensitivity to an other involves a fantastical picture

⁴² “...once the historical individual is ‘let in’ a number of things have to be said with a difference. 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 progressing life of a person.” (Murdoch 1970, p. 25)

⁴³ Murdoch, 1970, p. 25.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴⁶ For a helpful explication of this issue see Bagnoli, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ J. D. Velleman, “Love as a Moral Emotion,” *Ethics*, Vol. 109, No. 2 (1999): 338–374, p. 342.

of the self.⁴⁸ For to know the other as the manifestation or incarnation of a timeless idea (even that of a self-determining reality) *which is one's end* is to know the other still in relation to one's concerns; even if these concerns are shared by all beings with the power of self-determination. To know the other as a separate and different reality, Murdoch thinks, is to know a reality which has a certain orientation and which is historical through and through.

6 The Metaphors of Vision

If the concepts which go into the making of a human individual are thus personalized, then how is it ever possible to apprehend the reality of another human being? It is this question that motivates Murdoch's turn to a distinctive sensitivity as the ground of moral knowledge. Moral truths are impossible to codify in universal terms because moral truths concern individual realities like human beings: beings whose concepts and realities are historical and so individual through and through.⁴⁹ As Cora Diamond says when discussing Murdoch's view in connection with a point Korsgaard makes, "...what it is to know people (which is something we can come to see in ethics) shows us something about what knowing may be; and, in the same way, metaphysics does not determine first, independently of ethics, what sorts of entities there are, and what sorts would be impossibly queer. Rather, what sorts of entity people are (which is something we can come to see in ethics) shows us something of the sorts of entity there are."⁵⁰ But if it is true that moral knowledge or consciousness is the knowledge or consciousness of such realities, then, Murdoch thinks, the only way it can become available to us is through a distinctive sensitivity to aspects of the world of the sort the Aristotelian account also posits.

To elucidate this sensitivity *Murdoch* uses metaphors of vision: "perceiving," "looking," "seeing," "vision," "orientation" and "attention".⁵¹ Lawrence Blum

⁴⁸ As Millgram points out (Millgram, 2004) Murdoch has forestalled such interpretations in other writings. For instance, she says of Kant: "He attempts to make of the act of moral judgment an instantiating of a timeless form of rational activity; and it is this, this empty demand for a total order, which we are required to respect in each other. Kant does not tell us to respect whole particular tangled up historical individuals, but to respect the universal reason in their breasts" (Murdoch, 1997, p. 215).

⁴⁹ "A painter might say, 'You don't know what 'red' means'" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 29).

⁵⁰ C. Diamond, "Murdoch the Explorer," *Philosophical Topics*, 38 (1) (2010): pp. 51–85, p. 61.

⁵¹ It is often thought that it is the use of metaphors that occasions all these diverse readings of her work. Thus, there are readings that are particularist (Blum, *op. cit.*, Millgram, *op. cit.*); Aristotelian (McDowell *op. cit.*, Clarke *op. cit.*); Platonist (M. Nussbaum, "Faint with Secret Knowledge": Love and Vision in Murdoch's *The Black Prince*," in J. Brookes, (ed.) *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Kantian (Velleman, *op. cit.*; M. Merritt, "Love, Respect, and Individuals: Murdoch as a Guide to Kantian Ethics," *European Journal of Philosophy*, 25 (4) (2017): 1844–1863.); constructivist quasi-Hegelian (Bagnoli, *op. cit.*); Existentialist (Moran, *op. cit.*); Cavellian (C. Cordner, "Lessons of Murdochian Attention", *Sophia*, Volume 55, Issue 2(2016): 197–213); and Nietzschean (P. Katsafanas, "Nietzsche and Murdoch on the Moral Significance of Perceptual Experience," *European Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1) (2018): 525–545). The aim of this paper is not to take sides in this interpretative debate, but to offer a reading of Murdoch's thought which provides an alternative answer to the question of moral perception. This answer is distinctive and so places Murdoch along the side of and not under the wings of Aristotle's, Kant's, Plato's, Hegel's, Sartre's, Nietzsche's and Cavell's great works on moral thought.

argues that Murdoch's visual metaphors refer to distinct phenomena that she does not manage to keep apart.⁵² But he is wrong. These visual metaphors do not mean to refer at all: "Metaphors are not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models, they are fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition: metaphors of space, metaphors of movement, metaphors of vision."⁵³ The point of the metaphors, at least the ones that are deeply embedded in our understanding of ourselves is not to take us out to a referent which is, say, ineffable. It is, in a Wittgensteinian manner, to remind us of our lives with the concepts.

So how is it that we may come to know the radically historical reality of an individual? We may take our clues from the visual metaphors themselves. Take the metaphor of "looking". The kind of sensibility that looking is meant to point us to is not the sensibility of the five senses but the aesthetic character of the contemplative mood: the mood involved in looking at a work of art, in looking at the sunset, at what is happening, what someone is doing, etc. There is a sense in which to look at either of these things is to entertain something on a contemplative register: I don't just see a marker move on a surface, I am looking at you writing on the board. I don't merely see a canvass with some paint on, I am looking at a work of art, and so on and so forth. Similarly, when I am turning towards an individual reality, say the individual reality of another human being, I do not merely see things happen to or done by an agent; I am contemplating their being. "Let me look again" M of the example says as she is turning her attention to the individual reality of D. By which she obviously does not mean, "Let me see what it is she says or does," but "Let me contemplate D".

This dimension of looking — entertaining something on a contemplative register — is to a large extent the work of imagination. As I said above, Murdoch thinks that we are image-breeding animals. We make the world within which we move and desire in those images.⁵⁴ These are often our conceptions of what is good to be or how it is good to live (*courage, kindness, justice, etc.*). And it is in terms of these very conceptions that we "picture and realise, make real to oneself, the existence and being of other people."⁵⁵ The concepts of specialized vocabulary that M uses to make sense of D's reality (*common, juvenile, etc.*) are images in and through which M approaches D. Getting closer to D's reality is often a matter, as in M's case, of replacing one set of images for another (*youthful, gay, etc.*). In all cases, getting closer to an individual reality is a matter of progressively getting rid of the false images. "...psychic energy flows, and more readily flows, into building up convincingly coherent but false pictures of the world, complete with systematic vocabulary (M seeing D as pert-common-juvenile, etc.)."

"Attention is the effort to counteract such states of illusion."⁵⁶ It is the effort to *orient* — another metaphor of vision — one's imaginings away from the dazzling

⁵² L. Blum, "Visual Metaphors in Murdoch's Moral Philosophy," in J. Brookes, (ed.) *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 307.

⁵³ Murdoch, 1970, p. 75.

⁵⁴ Murdoch, 1992, p. 325.

⁵⁵ Murdoch, 1992, p. 322.

⁵⁶ Murdoch, 1970: 36.

self so that one's looking will enable one to *see things as they are*. As I said in the previous section, the kind of images we make is to a large extent a matter of our orientation in the world; a matter of what we are drawn to, what we value and what we are capable of noticing, or else a matter of what we pay attention to. Knowledge cannot be of anything momentary, Murdoch tells us in her *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.⁵⁷ On the contrary, the use of the metaphor of "attention" marks the continuous and dynamic character of knowledge that deserves to be qualified as moral.⁵⁸ "...if we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over."⁵⁹ The structures of value around us are built imperceptibly because even "at apparently empty and everyday moments we are "looking," making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important cumulative effects."⁶⁰ Thus, to come to know the reality of an other individual, one must turn one's imaginings away from the dazzling self and onto what enables one to get rid of the false images of the world. But what is that?

7 Orientation Towards the Good

I suggested above that the work of moral perception, on Murdoch's picture, is the work of orienting one's imaginings away from the dazzling self so that one's looking will enable one to see the individual reality of another. To achieve this truth providing orientation, Murdoch thinks, we must focus our imaginings towards the good in something like the way people traditionally focused their prayer on God.⁶¹ This, Murdoch thinks, is to a large extent a function of the metaphysics of our concepts. Our imaginings, our historical and individual conceptions are not, metaphysically speaking, mere shadows of publicly observable phenomena (our intentions, for instance, are not mere immature forms of actions). They draw their being from their relation to good as an ideal limit. In this relation they are infinitely perfectible, Murdoch tells us. But to speak of this infinitely perfectibility is not to say that they are on their way towards an otherworldly state of flawlessness. The good as an ideal end point of attention is not a frozen image of flawlessness that lies somewhere outside the realm of experience. One might perhaps think this on account of Murdoch's constant reference to Plato, but this reading rests on a mostly misleading interpretation

⁵⁷ "Knowledge cannot be something immediate, the possession of solitary individual perceptions or thought-data. Knowledge implies ideas, concepts, linguistic networks, connections." *Ibid.*: 175. And elsewhere: "Nothing momentary can be an item of knowledge, we must look elsewhere for the structures of veridical awareness." *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁵⁸ "...if we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over." (Murdoch, 1970, p. 36.)

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶¹ On the connection between good and God see Murdoch, 1970.

of Plato and Murdoch vehemently denies this.⁶² The infinite perfectibility of our imaginings or conceptions is a sign of their inherent fallibility, she thinks. Our conceptions are infinitely perfectible because they are inherently fallible and they are inherently fallible because what they purport to be images of is reality; which is to say, what by definition they may fall short of.⁶³ The conceptual connection between infinite perfectibility and realism is one of Murdoch's fundamental insights.⁶⁴ And it is an insight that lies deep in her conception of morality as marking a quality of consciousness and not a domain of facts. Moral consciousness, what Murdoch calls *attention*, is the consciousness which is oriented towards the good and so the consciousness whose images are infinitely perfectible; that is, images whose aim (and task) is to apprehend a reality, which in turn is by definition that of which our conceptions may always fall short.

To be able to entertain such endlessly perfectible conceptions though, we ourselves must constantly be focusing our ability to make images towards the good. This, Murdoch is quick to point out, does not mean that we should be closing our eyes to the evil we meet with in the world, but that we should be facing this evil without letting it corrupt our sense of the good.⁶⁵ But why, one will protest, is it not enough to say that in order to entertain these endlessly perfectible conceptions we must orient ourselves towards the true or the real? The reason is that the true or the real is on Murdoch's account inconceivable except in terms of the refinement of our ability to build structures of value in consciousness. What we see is a function of what we value, what we care for, what we are magnetized by. And I think that Murdoch's thought is that if what we are magnetized by is the good we will not be magnetized by the self. And so, we will be able to see what is really there; the separate and different reality of individuals. For if we are oriented towards the good and not our self, we will at crucial moments be able to think: "*This can't be all; let me look again*". And this is the thought without which we cannot entertain the possibility of conceptions that are infinitely perfectible. This, I think, is what Murdoch means when she speaks of the orientation towards the good in terms of faith. One must have faith in the good in order to be able to say, "Let me look again" in the

⁶² See also D. Robjant, "The Earthy Realism of Plato's Metaphysics, or: What Shall We Do with Iris Murdoch?", *Philosophical Investigations* 35:1 (2012): 43–67.

⁶³ When describing M's activity in the example Murdoch says: "M's activity is essentially something progressive, something infinitely perfectible. So far from claiming or it a sort of infallibility, this new picture has built in the notion of necessary fallibility. M is engaged in an endless task. As soon as we begin to use words such as 'love' and 'justice' in characterising M, we introduce into our whole conceptual picture of her situation the idea of progress, that is the idea of perfection: and it is just the presence of this idea which demands an analysis of mental concepts which is different from the genetic one." (Murdoch, 1970, p. 23)

⁶⁴ "One might start from the assertion that morality, goodness, is a form of realism. The idea of a really good man living in a private dream world seems unacceptable. Of course a good man may be infinitely eccentric, but he must know certain things about his surroundings, most obviously the existence of other people and their claims." (Murdoch, 1970, p. 57) For a focused discussion of this see Murdoch 1970, p. 45–75. Murdoch's notion of the good is a very rich concept, a careful explication of which lies well past the limited ambition of this paper.

⁶⁵ Murdoch, 1970, p. 59.

way M does. One must have faith in the good in order not to drown, for instance, in the abyss of the images built by despair, depression, jealousy, fear, anxiety, etc. One must be able to think to oneself “This can’t be all; let me look again,” even as one is in the inevitable some times grip of these image-breeding conditions. But why should one not just drown in these images? What reason do we have to suppose that things are really otherwise? At this point, one is tempted to point back to the discussion of the metaphysics of our conceptions and the definition of their being in terms of their relation to an ideal end point. But Murdoch does not take the easy way out. She admits that at the final analysis, the choice of where to rest is a matter of temperament, temperament and faith.⁶⁶

Even if we admit that there is a conceptual connection between realism and the relation of our imaginings to the good as an ideal end point, this does not mean that this connection may not be distorted, obscured, obstructed. In fact, Murdoch thinks, the internal connection of our conceptions with the good as an ideal end point is not a given but a feat, is not a fact but a factum. One must constantly be at work at orienting and focusing one’s creative imaginative activity towards the good in the above sense. Reality is easy to miss because it is hard to face. The infinite perfectibility of our conceptions sets an immensely difficult task for our understanding. In most cases it is easier to live in and with conceptions that are static, changeless, closed off from the possibility of being rubbed up against reality and found lacking. D is “pert,” “juvenile,” “common” and so M can hide from herself the fact that she is jealous of D. But when she comes to see D as “youthful” and “gay” she has to wonder: Why did I ever think her juvenile and common? Was I jealous perhaps? The impulse to stay with those imaginings must be resisted again and again. Good must be restated in its position as the ideal end point of our imaginings and conceptions. But this repositioning is not our romantic flight to another, superior reality. It is, on the contrary, our attachment to reality, the reality of historical and dissimilar individuals. This attachment to the historical individual is what Murdoch calls *love* or *attention*.⁶⁷

Here is what she has to say about love: “The tragic freedom implied by love is this: that we all have an indefinitely extended capacity to imagine the being of others. Tragic because there is no prefabricated harmony, and others are, to an extent we never cease discovering, different from ourselves. Nor is there a social totality within which we can come to comprehend differences as placed and reconciled. We have only a segment of the circle. Freedom is exercised in the confrontation by each other, in the context of an infinitely extensible work of imaginative understanding, of two irreducibly dissimilar individuals. Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness.”⁶⁸ We can imagine the being of others. We can make images in terms of which we can “picture and realise, make real to oneself, the

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70-72.

⁶⁷ “I have used the word ‘attention’, which I borrow from Simon Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality.” (Murdoch, 1970, p. 33).

⁶⁸ Murdoch, 1997: 216.

existence and being of other people.”⁶⁹ In the case of other persons, we can do this because we can occupy their perspective. “Be more sympathetic, imagine her situation, see it from her point of view’. Fairly everyday advice. Imagination is here a moral discipline of the mind, which would, for instance, help people not to become embittered or brutalised or stupefied by affliction.”⁷⁰ To occupy their perspective we must be able to put aside our practical and theoretical concerns, our concerns with our life and with our worldview. This, of course, does not mean that we do not bring in the concepts we already have in our attempt to understand the other. What it does mean is that we bring in these concepts *in order to imaginatively inhabit another perspective and not in order to address concerns that arise from our perspective*. In the ideal case, we bring in those concepts knowing not only that we may find new instances of them but also that they themselves may change if we do manage to start imagining the perspective of an other.⁷¹ To think that the individual reality of another person is otherwise knowable than by attempting to imagine their perspective is to suffer from the fantasy of the self in its theoretical manifestation. For it is to entertain the fantastical idea that a single perspective –perhaps that of the transcendental self or human nature– guarantees the knowability of the individual reality of all persons. But there is no such perspective. All that is there is our perspective - the perspective of an individual in pursuit of an individual. Of course, this does not mean that this perspective is the only perspective we ever occupy. It means that it is the only perspective from which we can understand who we are and what we do.⁷²

“We all have an indefinitely extended capacity to imagine the being of others,” says Murdoch in the above quote. But now the other is not limited to human individuals. There is no limit to the things that can legitimately lay a claim on our attention, she thinks.⁷³ Anything whose concept can only be given by attending to its reality and *vice versa* is an individual reality. And, thus, to know any individual reality one must suppress the fantasy of the self as that needle-like thing which is the holder of all concepts, which are also needle-like things, and thus and only thus achieve what is at once a distinctively cognitive and moral task. It is this aspect of our lives with the concepts that art can illustrate better than anything else; for it is art which is best equipped to show that it often takes understanding a whole world to know, for instance, what *red* is and can do. But the example of art is helpful in a further way: knowledge in art — say literature or film — is knowledge we have by what Wilson calls “imaginative seeing.”⁷⁴ We cannot watch a film or read fiction unless we know

⁶⁹ Murdoch, 1992, p. 322.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

⁷¹ “Moral tasks are characteristically endless not only because ‘within’, as it were, a given concept our efforts are imperfect, but also because as we move and as we look our concepts themselves are changing.” (Murdoch, 1970, p. 27).

⁷² “Often, for instance, when we pay our bills or perform other small everyday acts, we are just ‘nobody’ doing what is proper or making simple choices for ordinary public reasons; and this is the situation which some philosophers have chosen exclusively to analyse.” (Murdoch, 1970, p. 41)

⁷³ Murdoch, 1992, p. 347.

⁷⁴ W. Wilson, *Seeing Fictions in Film: The Epistemology of Movies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

we are so doing. But this does not consist in a separate act of monitoring ourselves watching or reading as Pippin stresses. To watch a film or read a novel is to know one is. But also, in watching films or reading novels we are seeing people thinking and doing things. We do not see an actor on a big screen and imagine who they are. We *see* this or that person and wonder what they are doing and why.⁷⁵ Similarly, in our case, we do not hear the cat shriek and imagine a certain pain. We are not limited in this way. We can come to *see* the cat's pain. We can do this, not because we can infer from other knowledge (say scientific studies; although these too might aid our imagination) but because we are in any case involved in the business of making images of the world and we can, perhaps, affect the course of this business. We say for instance "I can see that it is in pain" and this is already to think of the cat through a certain image. This is the image suggested by "it". Or we can say "I can see that she is in pain" and be in a better position to imagine the cat's life in its rich and complex dimension and so also the limitation to that life that the kids of the example are responsible for. We can say "The cat is in pain because the kids are playing with it" or we can say "The cat is in pain, these kids are torturing her" and we can mean two different things by *pain*. The former image invites us to consider the cat's pain on the analogy of what the table might feel if it could feel at all. Whereas the latter image invites to consider the cat's pain on the analogy of what a person might feel. Thus, the former image invites us to consider a pain that is merely sensory and devoid of thought-content, whereas the latter image invites us to think of a pain that involves a certain understanding of things. But this is not without consequence: it is conceivable that the first pain could be described as the result of mere play, but the latter could only be the result of torture.

Now the philosophical discussions on the question whether it is possible to imagine the being of another species are notorious.⁷⁶ But Murdoch is explicit about this: our capacity to imagine the being of others is an indefinitely extended capacity. "In a sense, everything about us asks for our attention," she says.⁷⁷ To think at this point that we may unproblematically imagine only the being of human individuals because we share in humanity with them is to in effect limit the extent to which we humans are separate and different beings. For it is to suppose that sharing in species nature is enough to make the task of attention easy. But the task of attention is always difficult. And this is not because the being we are asked to imagine could be the being of other species or even artifacts and natural things, but because what attention focuses on is realities which are individual; whether they be human or not. It is only once we keep it firm in our consciousness that the reality of the cat of the example is a separate and different reality that we stop secretly assuming that unless the cat is like us we cannot understand her. The cat need not be like us. Her reality

⁷⁵ R. B. Pippin, *Fatalism in American Film Noir: Some Cinematic Philosophy*, (University of Virginia Press, 2012).

⁷⁶ See T. Nagel, "What is it like to be a bat?" *Philosophical Review*, 83 (1974): 435–456. For a forceful and imaginative deconstruction of this entire discussion see J. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

⁷⁷ Murdoch, 1992, p. 339.

is separate and different. We do not need to relate the cat's being to ours: i.e., check to see whether her pain is like our pain, whether her pain matters to her in the same way that it matters to us, and so on and so forth. All this thinking is itself a way of resisting the idea that her reality is separate and different and no less graspable for that. But we can begin to know *the facts* only once we have accepted her separate and different being; for only then can we start to imagine *being* the cat, freely; without, that is, the antecedent constraints of the requirement to find similarities with our sensibility.

This imaginative seeing, this imaginative aspect of attention is not making it less of an act of attention, less of a case of seeing. When I imagine the being of the cat it is the cat and its reality that I have in mind. In the same way that when I imagine you reading this, it is you that I have in mind. The simple truth is that I don't need to imagine too much to imagine the being of the cat in the hands of the cruel kids of the example. I can imagine what it is like to roam the streets free and then all of a sudden be seized. I can imagine the sudden alarm at the first grip. I can imagine the violent effort to regain the former state of being. I can imagine the bewilderment at the kids' violent gestures and laughs. I can imagine the sense of loss of control over one's limbs, and so on and so forth. But, I may have to resist admitting that it is possible to do all this. For if I can imagine the cat's being in this case then there is nothing to stop me from imagining the being of other individuals in industrial meat facilities around the world. And if I let my image making ability truly go there, then I may eventually have to stop eating meat, *take myself out of humanity* in this way, maybe even start protesting the industrial genocidal slaughtering of animal life, and so on and so forth.⁷⁸ If I free myself from my need to protect myself, I may very well find that I can begin to make images of the cat's being even though I'm neither a novelist nor a primatologist. What I can't find is that I can do so infallibly. For if I could, my imagining would not purport to be of some reality; such as, for instance, is the reality of the cat's being in the horrible situation of the philosopher's example. As Diamond says, reflecting on the reality of human individuals gives us access to another way of knowing, and this other way of knowing is of another way of being.⁷⁹

8 Conclusion

I said in the beginning of this paper that moral perception is invoked in moral epistemology in order to address the epistemological need that the uncodifiability of the good gives rise to. In the second section of this paper I claimed that to advance a view of moral perception is to advance a conception of our sensitivity to aspects of the world as a sensitivity to grounds and rational relations. For to say that moral knowledge—say the knowledge that what the kids are doing to the cat is cruel—is grounded in a distinctive sensitivity to aspects of the world—say in our sensitivity to the cat's pain—is to say that it is possible to be sensitive to the reason why I

⁷⁸ Coetzee, *op. cit.*

⁷⁹ Diamond, *op. cit.* p. 61.

claim to know something. And I suggested that this insight is true to our everyday life with the concepts; it is for instance reflected in exchanges such as this: “The kids are cruel to the cat. – How do you know? – I can just see *it*; if you pay attention, you’ll see *it* too: *she is in pain.*” But now if the “*it*” here (i.e. that the cat is in pain) is the reason I claim to know that what the kids are doing is cruel, then one wonders: how is it that I can *see*, that I can be sensitive to things such as the grounds of moral knowledge?

McDowell’s very influential answer to this question invited us to go back to the Aristotelian view of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and conceive of moral knowledge along these lines. In particular, it invited us to conceive of moral knowledge as the answer to the question *How should I live* and of moral perception as the virtuous agent’s sensitivity to the features of one’s situation as engaging with the right concern for the circumstances; that is, as the virtuous agent’s susceptibility to reasons for acting, where acting is the virtuous agent’s specification of what doing well in the circumstances is and in this sense the virtuous agent’s moral knowledge. But I suggested in section three that McDowell’s Aristotelian answer to the question of moral perception is limited. The limitation, I suggested, can be seen in considering Iris Murdoch’s famous example of M and D. The example, I tried to argue, illustrates the moral quality of M’s consciousness of D in terms of M’s ability to be susceptible to D’s reality in a way that abstracts from any of M’s concerns; thus, even of M’s concern with the life worth living.

In the second half of the paper I tried to sketch an interpretation of Murdoch’s concept of attention as her candidate view of moral perception (the self-conscious ground of moral knowledge), that is alternative to the very influential view that McDowell invites us to consider. On Murdoch’s alternative picture, the uncodifiability of the good raises the need to posit a distinctive sensitivity as the ground of moral knowledge, because moral knowledge is knowledge of individual realities and not merely knowledge of the answer to the question *How to live*. An individual reality is uncodifiable in universal terms because it is historical through and through. Its concept is dependent on the contingent and unforeseeable unfolding of its reality and its reality is not graspable except in terms of this concept. Knowledge of such realities is possible, Murdoch argues, only when the self has been dethroned from the center of our attention. Human beings are image-breeding animals. They constantly make and remake the world in which they move and desire in those images. But these images (such as, for instance, are our so-called thick evaluative conceptions) are liable to a certain distortion: they can be no more than deflected images of oneself, closed off to reality and thus to the possibility of being false. To breed images of an individual reality, we must breed images that are inherently fallible; that is, infinitely perfectible. But this is no momentary task. It takes the imaginative effort of attention, the turning of one’s consciousness away from the dazzling self and onto the good (as the ideal end point of our images). Hence “...moral change for the better happens, if at all, slowly, as new modes of outlook (metaphor) and new desires come into being.”⁸⁰ The sensitivity which grounds moral knowledge, on this

⁸⁰ Murdoch, 1992, p. 330.

picture, is the individual's attention to another individual *as such*. What Murdoch also calls *love*.

Coming to know the kids' action as cruel is grounded in attending to the reality of an individual; i.e., the reality of the cat's being. In attending to the cat's being in the imaginative and loving way specified above I am *ipso facto* deepening my conception, my image of cruelty. To come to know of the kids' action that it is cruel is to come to deepen my conception of cruelty for it is to come to know of the cat's situation that this conception is applicable to it. And this coming to know is the act of an equally historical reality; my reality. For instance, where before I might have thought that animals are merely second best sentient creatures lacking in reason, now I come to think that my fixation with this simplistic and crude image of animality is what prevented me from imagining what it must be like to enjoy one's embodied freedom in the way that the cat of the example did prior to the captivation. And thus, I come to think that cruelty is not merely a matter of inflicting sensory pain but a matter of violating one's embodied freedom. Taken this way, the sensitivity which grounds moral knowledge is, on Murdoch's picture, *the individual's attention to or the individual's pursuit of another individual*. This sensitivity is sensitivity to rational relations for it is not intelligible except in terms of deepening and enriching one's concepts; the images with which one attempts to grasp and apprehend the world. If this is any right, then the question of moral perception is in one sense defused and in another reposed. It is in one sense defused, for moral perception is, on this picture, not the subject's sensitivity to an object but an individual's relation to another individual. And in another sense it is reposed with even greater urgency, for now the issue is how to be the individual in relation to an individual in a world which may very well be hostile to so doing.

Murdoch says towards the very end of her *Sovereignty*: "Goodness is connected with the acceptance of real death and real chance and real transience and only against the background of this acceptance, which is psychologically so difficult, can we understand the full extent of what virtue is like. The acceptance of death is an acceptance of our own nothingness which is an automatic spur to our concern with what is not ourselves."⁸¹ McDowell is right. We need to conceive of the ground of knowledge of the good in terms of a kind of sensitivity because the good is not codifiable. But his Aristotelian conception of what this entails for the domain of moral knowledge is limited to the practical concerns of the individual. Murdoch's conception, on the other hand, shows that the work of virtue is immensely difficult, not because it is immensely difficult to generalize about the affairs of human life but because it is immensely difficult to face the reality that human life is subject to death, chance and transience. This is the reality that is colossally difficult to face. But to face it is to appreciate that there is more to life than our life. There is also goodness that is unrelated to our reasons and practical concerns and life and whose apprehension pushes us towards the other. It is from the perspective of attention to this goodness that our concern with the life worth living can be re-posed; for from this perspective, our life can be seen as the individual reality that it is, fully

⁸¹ Murdoch, 1970, p. 100.

historical and finite and capable of coming into an all-important relation with other individual realities. McDowell is right. The concept of the good life is not codifiable in universal terms. But the reason is that this concept too is the concept of an individual reality. To see matters in this way is to broaden the moral question not merely past the narrow confines of the modern question of what is right or obligatory to do, but also past the admittedly wider confines of the neo-Aristotelian question what is good to be. It is to pose it as the Murdochian question of how to be the individual in pursuit of an individual; which, among other things, is the question of how to ask the moral question. Or so I have tried to argue in this paper.

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