

IRIS MURDOCH ON MORAL PERCEPTION¹

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Many students who sign up for undergraduate-level philosophy arrive with the expectation that moral philosophy is concerned with how one should act in the concrete and familiar situations of everyday life. Yet moral philosophers are often motivated by an ideal of neutrality, and adopt a detached perspective to achieve a scientific view of the competing moral theories. To concretise the points of disagreement they present highly specific examples that are abstracted from daily reality. There is something odd about the image of morality that comes into view. What kind of guidance about how to act in concrete and familiar situations can this form of theorising bring about? This paper examines Iris Murdoch's account of moral perception as an alternative starting point. Murdoch offers a perspective that is conceptually prior to the separation of thought from action, one that addresses the agent on the level of perception. While accounts of moral perception are often criticized for proposing a complacent moral theory that is inherently conservative, I argue that Murdoch's account offers a radical – or *tragic* – form of perfectionism. While moral philosophy cannot provide sufficient reasons to act, Murdoch shows that it can, like art, make us practical, capable of acting.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many students who sign up for undergraduate-level philosophy arrive with the expectation that moral philosophy is concerned with how one should act in the concrete and familiar situations of everyday life. Yet moral philosophers are often motivated by an ideal of neutrality, or disinterestedness, and adopt a detached perspective on morality in order to achieve a 'scientific' view of the competing theories. The education students receive thus takes the shape of what Iris Murdoch calls 'a visit to a shop' (*IP* 8/305),² a presentation of the available ethical positions accompanied by a disinterested analysis of their respective strengths and weaknesses. To concretise the points of disagreement students are presented with examples that are abstracted from daily reality. The form of education that ensues does not address students as agents but rather as spectators of a sphere in which other agents (utilitarians, deontologists, virtue ethicists etc.) perform obviously fictional actions, such as pulling levers, pushing fat men, shooting Indians and burning cats. While examples might help us to clarify our intuitions about the central concepts involved, there is something odd about the image of morality that comes into view. What kind of guidance about how to act in concrete and familiar situations can this form of theorising bring about? Why is it common to think that obviously fictional examples could bring concretisation?

This paper examines Iris Murdoch's account of moral perception as an alternative starting point. In Murdoch's view, moral philosophy tends to cluster around two modes of inquiry: a disinterested analysis of moral theories, and an applied examination of how one ought to act. Both modes of inquiry assume a separation between the will, understood as an unfettered capacity to bestow value, and a publicly available realm of actions and facts. The separation between the

will and the sphere of facts has an important, practical motivation, for, as originally formulated by Kant and developed by modern philosophers including Moore and Hare, it secures a morally significant domain from the encroachment of natural science.³ Yet in Murdoch's view, it retains two unquestioned assumptions, namely, that we can remain neutral in regards to our own thought, and that the data of moral philosophy is the deeds we do (or refrain from doing) and the truth or falsity of our explicitly stated moral judgments. For Murdoch, these assumptions have been called into question by the great critics of modern subjectivity, particularly Marx and Freud, who argue that philosophy's reflective position is liable to self-deception. For Marx and Freud, the inner life of the agent is neither under the agent's control nor clearly discernible as a publicly observable action. To develop a moral psychology sensitive to this critique, Murdoch proposes a starting point prior to the separation of the will from the realm of facts. This starting point is the agent's perception.

The idea of moral perception has received growing attention in contemporary philosophy. However, it has been widely criticised as a complacent moral theory that is inherently conservative.⁴ Those who defend a form of moral perception claim to advance a 'naturalized' moral epistemology that does not rely on a metaphysical conception of a will free from natural constraints.⁵ Moral properties such as 'wrongfulness' are held to be 'natural properties',⁶ for 'moral knowledge is basic empirical knowledge.'⁷ The claim is that moral properties are akin to other complex non-moral properties of which we have perceptual knowledge: just as 'vintners can distinguish between different kinds of dry red wine' and a 'park ranger can see that a particular tree is a silver maple as opposed to a sugar maple', so the person with virtuous character can discern moral properties.⁸ Yet critics argue that perception-based moral theories are characterised by 'the apparent absence ... of a way to criticize the sensitivity [for moral perception] itself – for it to take itself as the object of its own critical regard.'⁹ Barbara Herman expresses a widely-held concern that in the absence of a principle that stands outside the agent's character, the agent has no way to check their moral knowledge and thus relies overly on subjective conditions or a community's standard.

In what follows I argue that Murdoch's starting point offers an important alternative to the major positions in contemporary moral philosophy. Moreover, I argue that it avoids Herman's charge of conservatism. Murdoch's account of moral perception differs from recent accounts to the extent that it offers a perfectionist moral theory, that is, a moral theory that aspires to reach a standard beyond the agent's present condition. I begin in Section 2 by contrasting Murdoch's view with other proponents of moral perception. I argue that Murdoch identifies two requirements for a perception-based view of morality. First, it must correctly identify the obstacles to moral reflection. Second, it must describe the process of moral reflection and improvement in such a way that connects with its audience and opens new spaces for reflection. I then examine how Murdoch's account of moral perception aims to meet these requirements in Sections 3 and 4 respectively. In Section 5 I consider the role of art in Murdoch's work as an alternative to the thought experiments used in moral philosophy. Through an examination of *King Lear*, I argue that Murdoch promotes a tragic account of freedom in which the task of moral reflection is an infinite mandate. I conclude that while moral philosophy cannot provide us with sufficient reasons to act, Murdoch shows us that it can, like art, make us practical, capable of acting.

2. MORAL PERCEPTION AND THE LOSS OF CONSTRAINTS

Before turning to Murdoch, it is important to identify two major objections levelled against accounts of moral perception: they force us to say something counterintuitive (that two people

can have the same sensory field and yet disagree on a matter of fact), and they are inherently conservative (they deny any appeal to a principle outside the agent's character). Both of these objections begin from the argument that once any non-natural sphere of value is rejected, moral claims are contingent on subjective conditions. They become part of empirical psychology rather than moral philosophy. This argument been raised in the scholarly literature through discussions of Gilbert Harman's example of a student torturing a cat.¹⁰ I cite its representation in Cullison:

CAT: Pat and Chris are walking home from school. As they round a corner they see some of their undergraduate students pour gasoline on a cat and light it on fire. Chris screams, 'I can't believe they're doing that! That's so wrong!' Pat asks, 'What do you mean?' Chris replies 'Don't you see it? Can't you see that it's wrong?' Pat shrugs his shoulders.¹¹

According to Sarah McGrath, advocates of moral perception claim that 'we can *perceive* that, for example, torturing cats is wrong.'¹² This view rejects the fact/value distinction at the foundation of modern moral philosophy, which separates the will from the world disclosed by descriptive utterances. For modern moral philosophers including Moore, Hare and Stevenson, the only factual content to CAT is that which we can collectively observe; a student burns a cat, and two onlookers express their views on the act. From our vantage as spectators we can examine the attitudes of Pat and Chris, which evaluate a factual statement ('the student is burning a cat') by adding a non-factual premise ('burning cats is wrong/permissible') to form a moral judgment ('the student acts wrongfully/permissibly'). Thus construed, moral disagreements can occur despite agreement on facts. For advocates of moral perception, however, moral qualities are empirically real; the disagreement between Pat and Chris *is* a disagreement about facts. This move captures a powerful intuition that there *must* be a fact of the matter. Yet it raises an alternative worry, for it seems that we must say something counterintuitive about persons who fail to see moral facts. We want to agree with the modern philosopher that Pat and Chris have the same visual field, for neither seems to have faulty perceptual faculties. Yet, on the moral perception view, we are committed to saying that Pat *does* fail to see something, namely, the wrongfulness of the action. The moral perception view seems to commit us to denying that Pat's perceptual faculties are in working order after all.

Defenders of moral perception normally respond by appealing to two perceptual levels, one that is receptive and one that is, at least in part, active.¹³ Cullison argues that moral perception is compatible with the idea that 'more goes into a successful perception of a moral property than merely having that property present in your visual field.'¹⁴ The above objection only holds if we restrict perception to raw sensory input. Take the vintner analogy for example: a nuanced perception of the qualities of wine requires experience, training and study. The moral equivalent of the vintner is the person of virtuous character, who is trained to correctly discern moral properties. Yet even if we permit an active kind of perception, a further problem arises. Our capacity to say that Pat's perception has failed on the level of character is radically limited, for we have no access to a principle or standard beyond the agent's character. I can condemn Pat for failing to meet the principles of *my* character, or for deviating from a community's standard, yet the moral perception view seems to deny that there is an external reality constraining our disagreement.¹⁵

In the following sections I argue that Murdoch's moral philosophy maintains the naturalising impulse of the main accounts of moral perception and yet avoids the two objections raised in this section. First, it shows that moral disagreement can occur on the level of perception, for the agential character of perception is premised on the capacity to err. And second, it maintains a standard against which this disagreement can be contested, for it identifies a morally salient

reality independent of perception.¹⁶ For Murdoch, to frame the moral dimension of perception as the capacity to detect moral properties, as do most advocates of moral perception, focuses our attention on the wrong data. As we have seen, most advocates of moral perception separate two perceptual levels, one that is passive and non-conceptual, responsible for our perception of properties such as colour, and one that is partly active and minimally conceptual, such as the aptness of a certain colour of paint for a particular room. In the following sections I suggest that Murdoch rejects the idea of moral perception as knowledge of empirical qualities. Moral perception on her account is about orientation. Orientation occurs on *all* levels of perception; perceptual modes exhibit active characteristics that concern our capacity to attend to individual objects. That is, moral qualities are not accessed *through* perception conceived of as observation. Rather, perception for Murdoch is a moral activity all the way down. To use a phrase that recurs throughout her work, ‘clear vision is the result of moral imagination and moral effort’ (*IP* 36/329). This applies equally to seeing colours (‘A painter might say, “You don’t know what ‘red’ means”’ (*IP* 29/323)) as it does to moral evaluation (‘We do not simply, though being rational and knowing ordinary language, “know” the meaning of all necessary moral words’ (*IP* 28/322)).¹⁷ Because perception is active for Murdoch it is, like all activity, moved by a value. On her view, an example of moral disagreement such as CAT does not simply challenge an account of moral perception that reduces morally significant data to empirical qualities. It turns back on us as observers: if Pat, a fellow moral agent, can fail so spectacularly, perhaps *I* am also failing in some way or other. To recognise my capacity to fail is to acknowledge a constraining reality about which I can be wrong or right.

3. OBSTACLES TO MORAL AWARENESS

To unpack Murdoch’s account of perception let us consider the role of Marx and Freud’s suspicion of the starting point of modern philosophy in motivating her argument. In her essay ‘On “God” and “Good”’ Murdoch argues that modern philosophy must respond to the great critics of modern subjectivity who claim that the agent’s perspective is liable to self-deception. Marx and Freud share the view that human action is often governed by non-moral forces such as the ego or class relations, which are easily overlooked by moral philosophies that focus exclusively on questions of how to act. Recognising the need to raise questions about orientation before turning to behaviour, Murdoch claims that ‘[w]e need a moral philosophy which can speak significantly of Freud and Marx’ (*G* 45/337). She identifies two requirements for such a moral philosophy: it must identify the obstacles to moral reflection, and tell us what it is like to overcome them. In this section I examine the first requirement.

In Murdoch’s view, Freud and Marx represent two strategies for exposing the idea of a free and unconstrained will not merely as a fiction but also as a foil for deeper motivations of which the agent is only partially cognizant. While Marx presents the individual as determined by social and economic forces that operate beneath the veneer of reason, Freud viewed

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. (*G* 50/341)

Murdoch claims that Marx and Freud remind us that the individual is not capable of ‘stepping back’ from her moral commitments to reflect rationally on her inner realm of thought. Each presents a thoroughly naturalized picture of human behaviour as movement governed by

mechanical, non-rational forces that operate on a level beneath conscious experience. Marx uses this picture to explain individual behaviours according to their participation in a larger social whole. Freud uses it to explain behaviour by reference to libidinal energies. For both thinkers, Murdoch explains, '[o]bjectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings' (*G* 50/341).

Marx and Freud develop a basic insight of Kant's moral philosophy. Kant's idea of the practical standpoint turns on his recognition that most human behaviour is caused by the mechanical adherence to institutions and self-interested desires. Here Kant, Marx and Freud broadly agree: the two greatest obstacles to moral awareness are, in Murdoch's words, 'social convention' and 'neurosis' (*S&G* 52/216). Both obstacles are forms of what Kant (1997, 5:33) defines as heteronomy: behaviour governed by social convention entails blind obedience to received institutions, behaviour governed by neurosis is blind obedience to self-enclosed, dream-like aims.¹⁸ For both Murdoch and Kant, neither form of behaviour is constrained by reality. The difference between Marx, Freud and Kant lies in how they propose to overcome the heteronomous organisation of behaviour. Marx and Freud, as political theorist and psychoanalyst, offer scientific accounts of the forces that operate in the social and psychological domains. They address their audience as observers and invite them to see that the current arrangement of behaviour is not the necessary outworking of nature but could be otherwise arranged: as a classless society or as an ego that has taken the place of the id.¹⁹ Kant, on the other hand, addresses his audience as moral agents. Kant's assumption is that we cannot represent the danger that social convention and self-deception pose to moral action (i.e. freedom) from the standpoint of spectators. The moral salience of the situation only appears to us through a contrast with *another* representation of behaviour, one caused by adherence to a law. Kant invites his readers to recognise in themselves the capacity to represent their behaviour in the form of the categorical imperative, and to discover in this representation a power far superior to mechanical movement.

Murdoch agrees with Kant that moral philosophy can take place only from the agent's standpoint (though she would extend this to all philosophy). However, she is closer to Marx and Freud in that she does not think that a solution can be found through a clean break from mechanism. For Murdoch, Kant's separation of two standpoints, the spectator and the agent, does not escape the fantasy it is formulated to avoid. Fantasy, in Murdoch's view, is the 'proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and images' (*G* 65/354). While Kant's idea of self-interest certainly identifies one kind of fantasy, Murdoch detects in his philosophical picture of the self a second kind of fantasy:

When Kant wanted to find something clean and pure outside the mess of the selfish empirical psyche ... [h]is inquiry led him back again into the self, now pictured as angelic, and inside this angel-self his followers have tended to remain. (*SG* 81/368)

While Kant had good reason to highlight the dangers of blind obedience to our desires or a social institution, Murdoch argues that there are also dangers attached to the idea of turning inward for the ideal of action. The angel-self is governed by a will unfettered by social or neurotic constraints, resulting in a picture of moral action 'as something pure and real lifted (by metaphysical magic) out of the rat-run of egoism' (*MGM* 443). It remains within the realm of fantasy, Murdoch contends, for it prevents us from seeing the self accurately. We must respect the *representation* of a possible self-legislation, for the closer we look at the particular qualities of ourselves and other agents the more stubbornness, emotional incongruity and insensitivity to reason we find. Kantian morality thus encloses us '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' (*S&G* 52/216).

In contrast to Kant's angel-self, Murdoch aims to build a new moral psychology by connecting the insights of Marx and Freud 'with a terminology concerned with virtue' (*G* 45/337). To do so she draws from the Platonic notion of *eros*:

I have taken here the image (concept) of Eros from Plato. 'Eros' is the continuous operation of spiritual *energy*, desire, intellect, love, as it moves among and responds to particular objects of attention, the force of magnetism and attraction which joins us to the world, making it a better or worse world: good and bad desires with good and bad objects. (*MGM* 496)

Freud and Marx show us that a particular force governs *all* human behaviour such that freedom does not come via a break from but rather a redirection of that force. Murdoch, as a moral philosopher, casts this force as *eros*. 'The activity of Eros', she states, 'is orientation of desire' (*MGM* 497). As we see in Plato's works, especially in *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, *eros* is an ambiguous power.²⁰ It can be degraded, metamorphosing into ambition, greed, vanity or hatred. Or it can be refined by the virtues, which orient *eros* to the kind of objects that are beneficial for both individual and collective life. All human behaviour, in this sense, is governed by *eros*. For Murdoch, the primary question of moral philosophy is not how to break from forms of behaviour governed by fantasy. Rather, it is how to redirect *eros* from fantasy to reality.

4. MORAL REFLECTION AND IMPROVEMENT

Murdoch claims that the poverty of Kant's idealised picture of moral agency is manifest in its failure to describe 'what it is like for us to alter' (*G* 54/345). This brings us to Murdoch's second requirement for a moral philosophy capable of responding to Marx and Freud: it must describe the process of moral reflection and improvement in such a way that connects with its audience and opens new spaces for reflection. Murdoch offers such a description in 'The Idea of Perfection' through her example of a strained domestic sphere in which a mother-in-law (M) struggles to accept her new daughter-in-law (D). She explains that the case of M and D invites us to stand as spectators before a commonly available 'object' that 'we can all more or less see' (*IP* 16/312). The precise role of this object in Murdoch's philosophy, and its success, has received extensive scholarly attention.²¹ There is general consensus that, at the very least, it attempts to achieve two tasks: to show the deficiency of a type of existentialist-behaviourist moral psychology, and to persuade her readers that her own view of attention provides a superior account.²² While I agree with this assessment on the level of content, I suggest that it overlooks a more fundamental aim: to redirect the critical orientation of her readers from publicly observable actions to their own perceptual activity. The power of Murdoch's example, I argue, lies in its capacity to challenge the status of her audience *as audience*, that is, to challenge their self-conception as passive observers of an external field of behaviour and to alert them to a freedom prior to their capacity to observe, evaluate and choose.

The example runs as follows. M recognises D to be good-hearted young woman. However, she ultimately finds D unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. M finds D 'brusque', 'often juvenile', and does not like D's accent or choice of fashion (*IP* 16/312). In short, M feels that her son 'has married beneath him' (*IP* 17/312). Despite these feelings, however, M is so refined as to check her behaviour and act toward D with perfect grace and charity. Then the narrative shifts. While M could settle with a hardened sense of grievance that her 'son has married a silly girl' (and yet remain begrudgingly gracious), she takes an alternate route. The reason for this development, Murdoch informs us, is that M is 'an intelligent and well-intentioned

person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her' (*IP* 17/313). There are two capacities identified here. The first, the capacity for self-criticism, enables M to recognise something about herself: that she is 'old-fashioned and conventional', that she is 'prejudiced and narrow-minded', and that she most certainly is 'jealous'. By recognising that these qualities may be clouding her vision, M is able to exercise a second capacity: the capacity to look again. M 'observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters.' The change is not in D or M's behaviour but only in M's mind. M discovers that D 'is not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on.' M undergoes a change in thinking, and yet nothing in either her action or in D has altered.

Margaret Holland argues that Murdoch's primary goal is to show us how poorly the 'existentialist-behaviourist' picture of moral psychology accounts for the example.²³ The existentialist-behaviourist rejects the meaningfulness of the idea of an 'inner object' in the attempt to restrict moral discourse to what is clear and, as Hampshire (1975) would say, 'intersubjectively observable.'²⁴ For the sake of intersubjective clarity morality is reduced to 'the point of action.' The existentialist-behaviourist posits an absolute break between the inner and the outer, so that what I am 'objectively' is not under my control, for 'observers decide that', and what I am 'subjectively' is 'a footloose, solitary, substanceless will' (*IP* 15-16/311). Murdoch cites Hampshire for advancing this view, yet, as Justin Broackes notes, Hare and Stevenson could equally stand as opponents.²⁵ Because the existentialist-behaviourist denies the meaningfulness of M's inner thought, they conclude that nothing has changed, for M's behaviour is constant.

Murdoch agrees with the existentialist-behaviourist to the extent she denies the possibility of an objective description of M's inner world.²⁶ We do not have access to M's thoughts, except for the narrator's description. As M's inner journey suggests, the access we have to our own thoughts is also hazy (i.e. non-objective). However, Murdoch claims that anyone who has dealt with domestic conflict, especially those 'without philosophical prejudice' (*IP* 22/317), finds it necessary to use active metaphors such as 'look' and 'see' to describe what is going on in M. This is to say that those who are sensitive to the conflict and issues that make up the concrete details of our everyday lives find it necessary to speak of 'inner action' or '*activity* in a sense which does not mean privileged activity' to describe M's reflection on her perceptions and her attempt to try again (*IP* 21/316). Thus we find ourselves in 'one of those exasperating moments in philosophy', Murdoch laments, 'when one seems to be being relentlessly prevented from saying something which one is irresistibly impelled to say' (*IP* 21/316). The structure of Murdoch's concern is similar to that expressed by students who are disappointed by moral philosophy. What we *want* to say – and this, I take it, is the point of the example – is that M has been 'active', that is to say, 'morally active' (*IP* 19/314) or 'making progress' (*IP* 21/316). Yet the existentialist-behaviourist demands that we check this desire and dismiss it as wrongheaded. Given the constancy of her behaviour M has no introspectible material about which we can make any objective reference. M may imagine saying things to D, or describe D in her mind in various ways, but these inner states have no publicly available meaning and thus no moral relevance.

By confining the morally relevant data to that which is accessible to observers, the existentialist-behaviourist not only focuses our attention exclusively on matters of behaviour but also casts behaviour as mere physical movement that can be assessed only by the addition of an evaluative premise. Evaluative attitudes are thus removed from the description of actions. The virtue of this position is that it is sensitive to the fact that we are often mistaken about inner states. Yet in Murdoch's view, the idea of a risk-free, neutral position is an illusion. The existentialist-behaviourist has *already* been active in calling us to view the object as spectators. They

have distinguished ‘thought’ from ‘action’ in order to uphold a pre-selected value, namely, the value of scientific neutrality. This distinction violates *another* value, one held by those who think that M has morally progressed.

To characterise Murdoch’s aim in the example as providing a superior description than the existentialist-behaviourist, as do most scholars, is correct on the level of content but overlooks the deeper effect occasioned by Murdoch’s description of the object. Murdoch’s aim is ultimately to alert her readers to a freedom that proceeds their capacity to act, and thereby to shift them from an observing to an active standpoint. If we aspire to objectivity, and thus limit our focus to publicly observable material, we are forced to represent ourselves in a way that violates something we take to be morally serious. Yet if we recognise that we are always and already active in perceiving the objects to which we attend, we can recast our description of M’s way of looking at D – and *our way of looking at the example* – in ‘evaluative-normative’ terms, such as just or unjust, loving or unloving (*IP* 18/313). Murdoch describes the example in such a way that casts M’s recognition and struggle as the attempt to look at D ‘lovingly’. This has implications for her readers as audience. The way we describe the M and D object contains an evaluative-normative dimension, one available to us only as active and involved perceivers. Narration (or description) is not a disinterested mode of observation but an act of discrimination expressive of a value.

Murdoch’s example aims to show that any activity that can bring us closer to the facts about human relations and activities – reflecting on social-conventions, being confronted with our blind spots, even doing philosophy – is a moral activity, for it involves a process of recognising the constraints of a reality outside us. M’s struggle to look again is a rich expression of the will, not a will that is free from constraints but one that is free to acknowledge constraints and turn from the enclosure of the self toward reality. Love for Murdoch is the ability to direct one’s attention ‘outward, away from self which reduces all to a false unity, towards the great surprising variety of the world’ (*G* 65/354). Because the existentialist-behaviourist obfuscates the reflective deliberation M undergoes – because the existentialist-behaviourist obfuscates the moral salience of their own capacity to reflect on their perception and to look again – Murdoch concludes that they avoid the demand that the other’s individuality places upon them. Philosophy therefore shares the ambiguity of *eros*: it can be complicit in our fantasies as much as it can open us to reality outside ourselves.

5. TRAGIC FREEDOM

Thus far I have argued that Murdoch’s account of moral perception avoids the criticism often levelled against such theories. It does not require us to say something counterintuitive, for it explains how disagreements about moral qualities turn on our capacity to fail at perceiving reality. Neither is it guilty of conservatism, for the capacity to fail turns on a morally salient reality outside the agent’s character or a community’s standard. In this final section I provide an example of the kind of moral reflection Murdoch aims to promote by examining the connection she draws between morality and art. Murdoch’s account of moral perception turns on what can be termed a *tragic* account of freedom: a freedom manifest in forms of art that alert us to the infinite demand of reality, and show us what it is like to shift our orientation toward it. Throughout her work Murdoch refers to great tragedies such as Shakespeare’s *King Lear* as rich expressions of freedom, for they present the ‘exercise of overcoming one’s self, of the expulsion of fantasy and convention’ (*S&G* 52/216). In contrast to the abstract examples often proposed by moral philosophers, tragedies present domestic scenes in which the protagonists struggle to come to terms with the social and familial demands placed upon them. They are not formulated

to clarify our intuitions about moral concepts but rather to occasion the reorientation akin to Aristotle's *katharsis*, a form of purification grounded on a pleasure greater than the fantasies of self-interest (*S&G* 49/213). It is this slight capacity to reorient our vision, and to constrain ourselves to a reality outside us, that manifests the freedom prior to decisions about how to act.

To identify the connection Murdoch draws between morality and art, let us consider *King Lear*, which she praises as one of the greatest tragedies at several points in her work (*S&G* 52/216; *MGM* 120). Murdoch never tells us exactly how *King Lear* exhilarates us or in what sense it presents moral progress. This neglect is, on the one hand, unfortunate, for the change Lear undergoes is famously ambiguous.²⁷ We have no access to Lear's inner states apart from his constantly oscillating self-ascriptions, so we are left to interpret his progress in light of the action that unfolds. Yet, on the other hand, the ambiguity of *King Lear* is precisely why art, as opposed to philosophical thought-experiments, is so valuable on Murdoch's account: art presents concrete and familiar situations in such a way that invites the audience to *look again*, to make a further attempt at seeing clearly. To elucidate Murdoch's claim that *King Lear* presents what it is like to overcome one's self, I consider Stanley Cavell's analysis in his essay 'The Avoidance of Love'. This account is, of course, one interpretation, and reveals as much about its author as it does about Shakespeare's tragedy. My claim is that it embodies the kind of moral reflection Murdoch advances throughout her work, for it is concerned with identifying what it is like to make moral progress.

Cavell begins his essay with a critique of modern textual critics who overlook Lear's inner progress by emphasising his madness. The modern critic focuses on what is publicly available, such as the 'patterning' and 'structures' of Lear's words, in the search for a 'structure of which the individual words are parts.'²⁸ From this vantage Lear appears to the critic as mad and incoherent, for his words convey one demand to his daughters followed by another, conflicting demand. Thus construed, the critic watches on sadly as Lear's madness reaps havoc on his household. Yet Cavell contends that if we view Lear *in the theatre*, if we attend to him as a specific agent, a man with a singular and personal view of the world, then we discover that his madness is in fact a manifestation of a deeper, inner reality: his shame. Cavell argues that Lear is crippled by a shame that drives him to flee the public realm of sanity to his inner neurosis. Why? Because Lear cannot love. Lear is helpless, for he 'cannot bear love when he has no reason to be loved.'²⁹ The detached position he fashions as observer of his daughters' declarations of love is far from neutral, just as the detached position fashioned by the textual critic also displays a value. When viewed 'in the theatre', Cavell insists that we discover that Lear's position takes the form of a bribe, an attempt to ward love away for the reason most people ward away being loved: 'because it presents itself to them as a demand.' Lear tortures Cordelia to the extent that he asks for her love, which she wants to give, but simultaneously forces her to help him betray it by participating in the performance. When Lear enters the stage with Cordelia dead in his arms ('Howl, howl, howl! O! you are men of stones') he is opened to a terrifying insight: 'I might have saved her.' Had Lear done what every love requires – accept the offer of love and let it make its demand – things could have been otherwise. Cavell explains that in this moment of recognition, 'the closed world burst[s] into the infinite universe.'³⁰ Lear's self-fashioned spectatorship is shattered as he discovers a reality outside himself, one for which he is partly responsible for setting up. Lear's alteration expresses a tragic freedom, on Cavell's reading, for he can only discover his active role in the events, and see them for what they are, by discovering himself as their cause.

In the moment of Lear's recognition, on Cavell's interpretation, the audience discover that spectatorship is itself a fantasy. To be present is to be involved. This experience is tragic, Cavell claims, not because the world has become sad (for it has always been sad) but because

‘[t]ragedy has moved into the world, and with it the world becomes theatrical.’³¹ Tragedy moves into the world when we acknowledge our active role in its construction, thus transforming our vantage from the safety of the audience overlooking a publicly available sphere of movement into the tumult and risk of the stage. To use Murdoch’s terms, the world becomes theatrical when the illusions of the ego are destroyed, when the whole of reality, bereft of ‘the warm glow of selfish desire’, stands frighteningly visible (*MGM* 140). The buffered freedom of the audience is shattered and replaced with a prior, tragic freedom:

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. (*S&G* 52/216)

Tragic freedom involves a reduction of choices. It moves toward the limit of perfect responsiveness to reality: ‘If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at’ (*IP* 38/331). To this extent Murdoch’s account of moral perception can be described as perfectionist. While Murdoch acknowledges that perfect responsiveness to reality is unattainable, for human nature constantly moves toward pain-relieving delusion, she argues that it is nevertheless thinkable. It issues a representation of change that demands our respect, no matter how painful the process might be.

Murdoch’s tragic presentation of freedom demonstrates that her account of moral perception is not subject to the charge of conservatism. In fact, it pushes moral philosophy uncomfortably to the opposite extreme, for it radicalises our capacity to misperceive and thereby warrants a need for global self-reflexivity. This is particularly evident in the connection she draws between art and morality:

Art and morals are, with certain provisos, ... one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. (*S&G* 51/215)

For Murdoch, art and love are one in two senses. First, they are one in the sense that they are ambivalent powers, capable of serving our fantasies as much as destroying them. In ‘On “God” and “Good”’ she states that ‘The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one’ (*G* 57/347). In both art and love there is no absolute moment of self-awareness or mutual recognition, for love and true imagination are infinite mandates. We remain ever vulnerable to our tendency to retreat into the Cartesian world in which dreams are indistinguishable from reality. Second, art and morality are one to the extent that *great* art and *true* love both involve ‘the apprehension of something else, something particular, as existing outside us’ (*S&G* 52/215). Great art draws us into the veridical world in which practical and epistemic claims feature against a cognitive background against which error is an ever-present possibility. This independent reality is not transcendent because it is non-natural but because it always surpasses our capacity to comprehend it, for it is composed of individuals outside us.³² This apprehension is not theoretical but therapeutic: the sceptic is refuted not by virtue of arguments but by grasping the world as something about which they can be mistaken, as something distinct from their dreams. We are released from the Cartesian sphere in which thinking is indistinguishable from dreaming and drawn into the discovery that the possibility of error is the background against which thought is directed to the particular features of the objective world. This transition, for Murdoch, is fundamentally moral, for it orients us toward reality.

6. CONCLUSION

In ‘The Avoidance of Love’, Cavell states that tragedy, could it now be written, ‘would not show us that we are helpless’, for resignation is foreign to the tragic. Rather, tragedy today ‘would show us, what it always did, why we (as audience) are helpless.’³³ Murdoch’s philosophy begins from the conviction that the standpoint of the spectator does not necessarily help us to act, for it removes our inner complexity from philosophical attention and fixes us before the moral sphere as observers. For both Murdoch and Cavell, *King Lear* provides a powerful representation of the progress one must undergo to acknowledge that this position is not a neutral standpoint but an active achievement. The exhilarating challenge *King Lear* poses to us is whether we can learn to see before it is too late.

Murdoch shows us that the exasperation often felt by those who are philosophically untrained when they encounter moral philosophy for the first time is itself philosophically important, for it manifests a value often cloaked by contemporary methods in moral theory. In contrast to a large part of the philosophical literature that appeals to its audience as either disinterested observers or as unfettered wills, Murdoch begins by appealing to her reader as ‘a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees, and who has some continual slight control over the direction and focus of his vision’ (*IP* 39/332). This capacity for slight control is the core of moral philosophy (and art), and the aim of the moral theorist (and the artist) is to enliven their audience to the task of moral progress. This idea of progress does not present the will as unimpeded movement but rather as something ‘very much more like “obedience”’ (*IP* 39/331). To the extent that art enlivens us to a reality outside ourselves, art and morality are ‘two aspects of a single struggle’ (*IP* 39-40/332). While moral philosophy cannot provide us with sufficient reasons to act, Murdoch shows that it can, like art, make us practical, capable of acting.

Notes

1 This paper was originally presented at gathering organized by In Parentheses in Durham, and I am ever grateful to Rachael Wiseman and Clare Mac Cumhaill for promoting philosophical engagement with Iris Murdoch and her peers. Thanks also to Yarran Hominh, Andy Hamilton and several anonymous reviewers – not least from this journal – for engaged and encouraging feedback. Research for this paper was, in part, made possible by an Early Career Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust.

2 I use the following abbreviations for Murdoch’s individual essays, which will be cited in the text: *IP* = Iris Murdoch, ‘The Idea of Perfection’, in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 2001), 1-44; *G* = Iris Murdoch, ‘On “God” and “Good”’, in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 2001), 45-74; *SG* = Iris Murdoch, ‘The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts’, in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 2001), 75-101; *S&G* = Iris Murdoch, ‘The Sublime and the Good’, in *Chicago Review* 13(3) (1959), 42-55; *VCM* = Iris Murdoch, ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’, in *Existentialists and Mystics* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997); *SBR* = and Iris Murdoch, ‘The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited’, in *Harvard Review* 49 (1959), 247-271. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin Books, 1992) will be abbreviated as *MGM*. Page references are given to both the original works and their reprintings in *Existentialists and Mystics* separated by a forward slash. See Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997).

3 Moore and Hare both aim to free the will from the world disclosed by descriptive utterances; Moore (1912) separates moral properties (such as goodness) from natural properties (such as happiness or pleasure) on the basis of their simplicity and indefinability, Hare (1963) places logical constraints on the evaluative attitudes solicited by factual statements, showing that evaluative statements simply cannot be derived from facts with the addition of an evaluative premise. G. E. Moore, *Ethics* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1912); R. M Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).

4 Blackburn and Wallace for example argue that, without an external principle, moral perception lacks a critical capacity to check and then alter one's character. Simon Blackburn, 'Reply: Rule-Following and Moral Realism', in S. Holtzman and C. Leich (eds.), *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1991), 163-189, 164-5; R. J. Wallace, 'Virtue, Reason, and Principle', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 21(4) (1991): 469-95, 190-95.

5 Defenders of moral perception include Sarah McGrath, 'Moral Knowledge by Perception', *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004), 209-228; David Copp, 'Four Epistemological Challenges to Ethical Naturalism: Naturalized Epistemology and the First-Person Perspective', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 (2001), 31-74; M. Watkins and K. Jolley, 'Pollyanna Realism: Moral Perception and Moral Properties', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 80 (2002): 75-85; Andrew Cullison, 'Moral Perception,' *European Journal of Philosophy* 18 (2010), 159-175; Robert Audi, *Moral Perception* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

6 Copp, 'Four Epistemological Challenges to Ethical Naturalism', 32.

7 Cullison, 'Moral Perception', 159.

8 Cullison, 'Moral Perception', 160.

9 Barbara Herman, 'Making Room for Character,' in S. Engstrom and J. Whiting (eds.), *Aristotle, Kant and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 56.

10 Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 8.

11 Cullison, 'Moral Perception', 160.

12 McGrath, 'Moral Knowledge by Perception', 221.

13 This active component is described by some as the 'productive' or 'projective' operation of perception, drawing from Hume's distinction between a 'receptive' and 'productive' faculty of the mind. See Copp, 'Four Epistemological Challenges to Ethical Naturalism', 56; McGrath, 'Moral Knowledge by Perception', 221; Cullison 'Moral Perception,' 162; Audi, *Moral Perception*, 38-9; John McDowell, 'Rule-Following and Moral Realism', in S. Holtzman and C. Leich (eds.), *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 141-162.

14 As McGrath states, moral perception does not entail that 'we can perceive moral facts without a lot of conceptual sophistication.' McGrath, 'Moral Knowledge by Perception', 221.

15 There are important and sophisticated responses to this worry by advocates of moral perception, for example, McGrath, 'Moral Knowledge by Perception', 210; Cullison, 'Moral Perception', 160-163; and Audi, *Moral Perception*, ch. 4. My present aim, however, is to highlight how Murdoch's account of moral perception avoids this worry altogether.

16 Murdoch regularly claims a 'naturalistic' status for her moral philosophy (e.g. *VCM* 92-3, *IP* 28-9/322-23). She claims that, like most naturalists, she rejects the existence of metaphysical entities, but that, unlike most naturalists, she rejects the claim that moral terms cannot be defined by non-moral terms and vice versa. It is this latter claim that grounds the fact/value distinction held by most naturalists, which Murdoch rejects.

17 Murdoch recognises that this move explodes the concept of value, for all perception becomes value-laden. Yet she argues that this move appears problematic only if we adhere to a naïve picture of naturalism wherein legitimate knowledge is disinterested and value free (*IP* 29/323).

18 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*. Translated by M. Gregor. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5:33.

19 Of course, under therapeutic conditions the psychoanalyst would address their patient differently. Here I refer to Freud's mode of address in his theoretical works such as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

20 In the *Symposium*, for example, Plato represents *eros* as a poor and needy power. Diotima states that *eros* is 'wanting to possess the good forever' (206a11). Yet because humans are mortal, they cannot love the good itself but search for the good in particular objects. This leads to frustration, as the good is never found in particularity but leads us ineluctably to the universal, which we cannot find.

21 For a helpful summary of the various interpretations, see Niklas Forsberg 'M and D and Me: Iris Murdoch and Stanley Cavell on Perfectionism and Self-Transformation.' *Iride: Journal of Philosophy and Public Debate* 30(2) (2017): 361-372.

22 See Margaret Holland, 'Social Convention and Neurosis as Obstacles to Moral Freedom,' in J. Broackes (ed.), *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 255-273, 260; Justin Broackes, 'Introduction', in J. Broackes (ed.), *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1-92, 40-43; Maria Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 87.

23 Holland, 'Social Convention and Neurosis as Obstacles to Moral Freedom', 256.

24 Stuart Hampshire, *The Freedom of the Individual* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975).

25 Broackes, 'Introduction', 47.

26 Murdoch states that 'there is certainly one thing which I do *not* wish to maintain, and that is that we have infallible or superior knowledge of our mental states' (*IP* 21/316).

27 Murdoch does examine *King Lear* at greater length in *MGM*, but her examination there is not concerned with moral progress but rather with the play's resolution: 'the loss of promised redemption' to 'wise gentle stoical peace' (*MGM* 120). See *MGM* 118-123.

28 Stanley Cavell, 'The Avoidance of Love: A reading of *King Lear*,' in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 267-356, 269.

29 Cavell, 'The Avoidance of Love', 289.

30 Cavell, 'The Avoidance of Love', 344.

31 Cavell, 'The Avoidance of Love', 344.

32 To 'understand other people', Murdoch states, 'is a task which does not come to an end' (*SBR* 269/283).

33 Cavell, 'The Avoidance of Love', 346.