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Iris Murdoch's Criticism of Traditional Views of the Moral Self: An Alternative Account of "seeing" the Others

Abstract

The main objective of this article is to reconstruct Iris Murdoch's criticism of the moral self as it was developed by liberalism, romanticism, existentialism and linguistic empiricism that interpreted the moral person as entangled either in a world of essences (Kant's view) or in a world of mere existence in which the interplay of both necessity and freedom is at stake. Thus what is missing from all these theories is a sufficient development of what it is to have a regard for others through aesthetic perception, which is the most important aspect of the moral self. At the difference of these conceptions Murdoch offers an alternative view, both to liberal ethics in the Kantian tradition and to contemporary ethics, as she argues that to have regard for others demands responsiveness which can also be explained in terms of aesthetic sensibility. Murdoch's ethics rests on an analogy between aesthetic sensibility and moral sensibility based upon the model of the artist's unconditional love for his characters, which she interprets as being a matter of seeing and loving others. The author's thesis is that love is the crucial point of Murdoch's conception of the moral self where the moral and aesthetical sensibility, as well cognition, intersect each other, because seeing others incorporates emotions of respect and compassion that characterize love and such seeing is cognitive love.

Keywords: Iris Murdoch, ethics, aesthetics, moral self, existentialism

> *Morality, as the ability or the attempt to be good rests upon deep areas of sensibility and creative imagination, upon removal from one state of mind to another, upon a shift of attachments, upon love and respect for the contingent details of the world* (Murdoch 1992, 337).

Introduction

Iris Murdoch attempts to better define the moral self as being essentially other-directed through its capacity to love. Murdoch seeks to unify the moral self by combining the authority of truth, duty and virtue, Good and love. Love as a virtue is a response to the perception of value; sensibility suffuses it, and this love contents itself with an awareness of the importance of

others. Instead of viewing morality as a system of principles to be grasped by the detached intellect, Murdoch's aim is to correlate an account of the moral self as other-directed with the idea of the good through aesthetic perception.

In this article, I examine Murdoch's historical criticism of the moral self as developed by liberalism, romanticism, existentialism and linguistic empiricism. In their distinctive modes, these philosophical traditions give support to each other in their portrayal of the moral person entangled either in a world of *essences* (Kant's view) or a world of mere *existence* in which the interplay of both necessity and freedom is at stake. In various ways, states Murdoch, these philosophies are marked by an overall cast of romanticism in that they strengthen the role of *the will* in becoming moral, at the expense of other faculties such as consciousness; the focus on the will makes the secluded moral self solipsistic. What is missing from all these theories, Murdoch argues, is a sufficient development of what it is to have a regard for others through aesthetic perception, which is the most important aspect of the moral self. Murdoch offers an alternative view, both to liberal ethics in the Kantian tradition and to contemporary ethics as she argues for a more situational account of the moral self. To have regard for others demands responsiveness which can also be explained in terms of aesthetic sensibility. Murdoch's ethics rests on an analogy between aesthetic sensibility and moral sensibility based upon the model of the artist's unconditional love for his characters, which she interprets as being a matter of seeing and loving others. The writer's aesthetic or moral sensibility is described by Murdoch as a kind of sensibility to the reality of others which generates an aesthetic or ethical response. Moral sensibility is a way of feeling and signifies a response to the reality of others charged with emotion (i.e. unconditional love).

For Murdoch, aesthetic perception is a fundamental case of moral perception. The resulting close analogy between one paradigmatic case of moral regard and the more common examples of such a regard is instructive. This hermeneutical device which focuses on aesthetics, according to Murdoch, helps us to understand how moral perception is other-directed.

Liberalism

Murdoch highlights some fundamental defining features of liberalism, the most salient being tolerance, mistakenly taken by some liberals to be an adequate conception of regard for others. The essential insight of this tradition is that other people exist and their variety of purposes and ways of living should be respected. The liberal principle of tolerance reflects the moral obligation to respect other people's lifestyles, value systems, and modes of individual expression. The respect for personal autonomy as the capacity for self-government and freedom of expression and action of the individual are central aspects of the liberal view of the moral self.

Liberalism would have us sustain a social order with respect to a plurality of persons "who are quite separate and different individuals and who have to get along together" (Murdoch 1997, 265). However, the idea of equal respect for the individuals' capacity to judge value questions for themselves as the basis for tolerance demonstrates that tolerance also rests on a prior commitment to neutrality in respecting the autonomy of citizens, (autonomy simply refers to the capacity to judge values for oneself, independent of external forces or manipulation). In Murdoch's interpretation, tolerance can be expressed by saying that people should be neutral towards their co-citizens' conceptions of the good life. To be neutral is to hold no position on the issue concerning the others, or least to let one's own position play no role in actions affecting two, perhaps opposed, parties. This attempt at neutrality distinguishes the separate spheres of public and private life. A right to privacy is thought to be basic for a liberal society, but what characterization can one give of the distinction between what is public and what is properly private?

Murdoch interprets the likely liberal answer to this question. For liberals, only those activities that violate or threaten to violate acceptable rules of social interactions become the proper subject of the public control. Those actions which do not carry such a threat but involve an individual pursuit of what is thought to be valuable, morally speaking, are considered private and outside public control. Tolerance, as such, is at the heart of respecting others' privacy. The inner life of others does not count in the public realm; the liberal moral appraisal conceals their individuality. Therefore, Murdoch claims tolerance does not account for an appropriate view of the moral self as having a regard for others. In this sense, to tolerate others implies consenting to, in spite of one's disagreement with, some moral behavior pattern and thus includes a negative appraisal of what is being tolerated. One might hate others and yet tolerate them. As Murdoch interprets it, the basis of liberal tolerance of others is not the individual as a particular, unique being but the individual as a public subject. This liberal concept of the moral self is derived from the concept of the citizen in the liberal state.

Political liberalism (as typified in the writings of Hobbes, Locke, Hume and Mill) envisions the fundamental moral virtue to be that of respecting "the actual empirically existing person whatever he happens to be like"(Murdoch 1997, 264). Liberalism drew its concept of such an actual "empirically existing person" from the intellectual effort to construct an idea of the moral self based upon a scientific conception of the material world, rather than upon a complex vision of the moral self that also includes the inner life.

As a materialist, Hobbes believed that natural phenomena were composed only of physical elements that functioned according to deterministic laws of cause and effect. Human beings were no different. Since people are, according to Hobbes, naturally selfish they will act in others' interests only as a result of social conventions: law, social practices and rules of behavior backed up by various types of sanctions. Therefore, according to Murdoch, the liberal concept of toler-

ance expresses an aspect of egoism in that, if one is impeded by the "other" in his quest for gratifying his desire (Hobbesian freedom as non-interference), prudence becomes one's first consideration.[1] At best, one is called upon to adjust one's aims towards others in order to maximize the satisfaction of one's interests. Thus politics and morality are so conceived to depend on a concept of the moral person whose principle virtue is a "minimal" tolerance.

The only exception which Murdoch recognizes to this view of tolerance within political liberalism is John Stuart Mill's stress upon the importance of compassion and sympathy as aspects of regard for others. Mill requires that the moral self be concerned with the sufferings and happiness of others, i.e. avoiding or causing suffering in others as well as a possible concern for relieving suffering. According to Murdoch, Mill's notion of tolerance for diverse individuals is not Romantic, as he does identify the moral self as a discrete particular and not as an abstract whole or a self-contained entity. And, although Mill conceives the moral self as confronted with a society of dissimilar others and takes particularity to be the essence of personality, he yet leaves out an adequate account of how we might come to care for others in their own uniqueness. Murdoch admits that Mill's view of utility is a measure of individual well-being but because one's welfare is defined apart from one's association with others except in so far as such association leads instrumentally to one's own good, a proper regard for others is lacking. For many people define the value of their lives according to whether some group flourishes (such as family, culture or tradition), not just to whether they are made better off individually, as simply singular members of that group.

The liberal picture of the virtues of the liberal man is therefore static leaving no room for moral progress with respect to regard for others; what is salient is what is publicly, empirically observable: the political institution, the dogma of individual liberty, and of the moral person as a political actor. Murdoch qualifies this "tolerance," the virtue of democratic pluralistic societies, to be "agnostic tolerance" toward the reality of others. She relates this notion to Kant's agnosticism and believes this is implicit in Kant's theory of the sublime. For Kant, the inability of reason to comprehend the whole in the experience of the sublime leaves us with a feeling of defeat and yet victory. Kant's theory of the sublime, in Murdoch's interpretation, provides a proper recognition of the reality of others, particularly of their suffering. For her, the sublime

[1] For Hobbes, liberty consists in the absence of external impediments. In the state of nature, the law of nature operates according to prudential rules of survival. It is the fear of destruction that urges human beings to search for security through superior power. Hobbes' political theory, often considered an example of the social contract, epitomizes the vision of the moral person as merely a public political being, according to Murdoch.

may be interpreted as a sharp recognition of the fact that the others are, to a degree that we never cease to discover, different from ourselves.

Although Murdoch thinks that the strength of Kant's liberalism resides in what she calls Kant's "agnostic tolerance" of the recognition of the limits of reason to comprehend the whole of reality including the reality of others, Kant's agnosticism is nonetheless "dramatic" in nature. This drama comes from the effort of the individual to fully imagine oneself as a distinctive person confronting the world all by himself alone. Since each person is unique, privately different from others in needs, desires and beliefs, we cannot know anyone fully; hence, "agnostic tolerance" is the best we can do when it comes to having a regard for others.

Murdoch believes that the romantic conception of a person in relation to others, though undoubtedly dynamic, in contrast to liberalism is, however, "neurotic," as it is focused almost exclusively upon the self as constituting the whole reality. Murdoch associates this danger especially with "traditional" Romanticism, but also with the "romantic rationalist" Sartre.

Romanticism

The idea that reality is a product of the imagination is a feature of most romantic thought. Murdoch's general criterion of romanticism covers both literary and philosophical romantics: "writers who give the impression of externalizing a personal conflict in a tightly conceived self-contained myth" (Murdoch 1997, 265). Writers in the romantic tradition have tended to replace the real individual in their novels with a symbolic one. Instead of presenting characters interacting freely with one another in a realistically conceived world, the romantic novel is dominated by the will of the author who uses the characters to externalize his own internal personal conflict. This way the author's personal conflict becomes a myth which is constructed so as to be tightly self-contained, making the romantic view of the moral person "neurotic."

Murdoch relates "neurosis" to the construction of fantasies associated with "the self-contained myth" that inflates the importance of the ego, thus obscuring the reality of values existing outside of it, including the reality of others. For romantics, the regard for others can be lost in this neurotic perception of the self. Romantics are thus heirs of Kant's concept of the moral person as a rational being whose basis for the respect of others is not their individuality but rather the universal reason all rational beings share. According to Murdoch, Kant's neglect of others in their own particularity is the root for the later degeneration of his liberalism into Romanticism, which ignores the uniqueness of individuals in morality.

Kant is well known for limiting reason to scientific knowledge of the world, but Murdoch argues that his philosophy is nonetheless *dramatic*, overblown (hence romantic), in its insistence upon placing the moral person at the center of a rational, universal vision of the moral

order. For this reason, such a dramatic vision of moral personhood is also neurotic. This *neurosis* is not rooted in a Freudian traumatic childhood. Rather, this neurosis is a matter of a certain lack of imagination seriously affecting the perception of the world around us, specifically, the perception of others. This world for later romantics becomes an alien setting, substantially hostile to one's freedom, for others are conceived as either replicas of oneself struggling to be free or as threateningly different members of the *herd* (Nietzsche), *spiritless* (Kierkegaard) or persons mired in *bad faith* (Sartre). Through an appeal to aesthetic sensibility as a learning ground for ethical sensibility, Murdoch wants to break out of the *agnostic* isolation of the traditional liberal moral view of others as well as of the *neurotic* isolation of romantics. (I will return to this aspect of Murdoch's thought in the next part of the chapter).

For Murdoch, much of contemporary philosophy as well as the great romantic philosophies go back to Kant, "the father of all modern forms of the problem of freedom, and also, incidentally, the father of most modern theories of art" (ibid., 266). Murdoch's rejection of the romantic view of human beings does not, however, make her open to the conception of freedom as expressed by Kant. In a lengthy discussion, Murdoch discerns the marks of romanticism in Kant's conception of morals, even though Kant's rational being as an end-setting being is nothing but an abstract person with no desires, feelings or emotions:

> Puritanism and Romanticism are natural patterns and we are still living with their partnership. Kant held a very interesting theory about of the relation of the emotions to reason. He did not officially recognize the emotions as part of the structure of morality. When he speaks of love he tells us to distinguish between practical love which is matter of rational actions, and pathological love which is a mere matter of feeling (ibid., 366).

Within Kant's concept of the moral actions, reason becomes a necessity imposed upon the other in the name of a universal moral law. We treat people as ends in themselves not for their uniqueness, their contingencies and particularities but as "*co-equal bearers* of universal reason" (ibid., 262). *Achtung*, the respect for the moral law, "is a kind of a suffering pride which accompanies, though it does not motivate, the recognition of duty"(ibid., 367). It becomes the freedom by which good will replace the complexity of morally qualified motives and of virtues. *Achtung*, the only emotion felt as a blend of pleasure and pain, accompanies our freedom, but then again, when we are won over by passion, we realize we are nonetheless capable of rational conduct.

Existentialism

The existentialist concept of the moral person is fundamentally a metaphysical concept that arises from stripping away the "reified" values of conventional morality, thus exposing a

metaphysical core of the person without "essential telos" (Sartre's terms). In the absence of such a ruling telos, this metaphysical core of the person is free because of self-consciousness (*"etre-pour-soi"*) which distinguishes the person from everything else which is in-itself (the world of things or "*etre-en-soi*"). The rationality of this world of things is a veneer which masks this all-governing freedom. This way of conceiving the person implies her absolute responsibility to give meaning to the world through her own projects, and to respect and defend the freedom of all other *self-conscious* beings. The total man, the man who enjoys freedom assuming his own exclusive responsibility for his actions, is essential for Sartre. It is individual choice which finds freedom and value, giving to his actions a meaning which otherwise they would not have. In this sense of freedom, stone walls do not a prison make, for I am free as long as I am conscious. If, on the other hand, one thinks of freedom in the ordinary sense of social, civil, political freedom, as a domain of personal spontaneity which might be infringed and which ought to be respected - then how is *this* freedom which respects others to be connected with *that* personal freedom? They can only be connected by assuming some sort of universal human nature, which Sartre does in *Existentialism and Humanism*, although this contradicts his earlier position: "Sartre wants to have the best of both these worlds ... The meaning [of freedom] is egocentric. Yet, as I am infinitely free, I am also infinitely responsible"(ibid., 139).

For Sartre, the fundamental virtue is "sincerity," a complex, synthetic idea that is the opposite of *bad faith*. Concerning the regard for others, this Sartrean conception of the moral self implies a defense of liberal politics and not of socialist or Marxist politics, as some including Sartre himself on occasion, had interpreted it. Capitalism for Sartre represents a structure which supports "reified" values; this explains Sartre's affinity for a certain Marxist critique of how capitalism alienates man from himself. The meaning that we find in the world through our personal projects is egocentric in that one is free because one is self-conscious and therefore responsible: "Neither the institutions and rights of the bourgeoisie, nor the dogma of any religion, nor any conception of historical development can confer sense from the outside upon my actions" (ibid., 139).

This Sartrean conception of the moral self leaves room for an "ethics of ambiguity," as Simone de Beauvoir describes it.[2] The person is free in the world through his own project, but different persons have different projects and, thus bestow different, and sometimes, conflicting

[2] "What is the political cash value of such an idea? Simone de Beauvoir sums up the existentialist position when she says: *seule la revolte est pure* ('only revolt is pure') ... Sincerity is not a state of being. This viewpoint, plausible in a personal psychological context, has its political counterpart. It fits perfectly the ethos of a resistance movement. But once the comparative simplicity of this situation is removed, it shows itself of a fear of authority, conformity, achievement." (Ibid., 140).

meanings on the world outside. The struggle among this multitude of projects and persons is finally moderated usually by what amounts to a form of tolerance. This existentialist tolerance however, is not based on an empirical finding of differences between people (as in liberalism); it resides in a difference viewed in terms of metaphysical freedom. Both Nietzsche's[3] and Kierkegaard's[4] conceptions of moral self are echoed in this concept with the former struggling against the inauthentic value of the herd and the latter against the spiritlessness of institutionalized Christianity. The concern with the "total man" and the struggle of the self with itself makes the existential man a solitary being (Kierkegaard's man is a solitary one except for the mystery of religion and an almost "veiled deity," whereas Nietzschean man is self-reliant in his "will to power").

In her view of moral self, Murdoch retains the idea that human beings are *nothing* when it comes to some inherent human *telos* (i.e., Sartre's *néant,* man is not a *substance)* but even so, they need to confirm their meaning in the world according to their own project, which is a creative and imaginative quest.[5] In our endeavor to find our proper meaning in the world, we are called upon, claims Murdoch, not merely to display tolerance towards others, but to display an effort *to understand* and *respect* the projects of others. For Murdoch, existentialism is heir to romanticism in as much as both are marked by a neurotic conception of the moral person. Cartesian via the primacy and authority of the personal consciousness (ibid., 133) and solipsistic (the Cartesian *cogito*), the existentialist "total man," as is the liberal man, is concerned with *free-will* positing an isolated moral agent as an isolated *principle of will.* Existentialism professes to be a philosophy of action, but it does so only by a sort of romantic provocation. The *leitmotif* of existentialism, "existence precedes essence," stems from the non-identity of "existence" with its metaphysical correlative "essence." This follows from the claim that man is nothing, leaving existence in the absence of a universal human *telos,* to be determined by man's essence as being only what he makes of his existence. Placed in an alien world, the free, solipsistic individual is not defined according to a rational "end" for existence, but by rational choices in action. This

[3] Murdoch (1997, 224). "Twentieth-century man, outside the Marxist countries, finds his religious and metaphysical background so impoverished that he is in some danger of being left with nothing of inherent value except will-power itself."

[4] Murdoch (1997, 104). "The free and lonely self, whose situation Sartre pictures in these somewhat Kierkegaardian terms, discovers the world to be full of ambiguities. That is why we are condemned to choose; we choose our religion or lack of it, our politics or lack of it, our friends or lack of them. Within the wide limits of our historical situation we choose one world or another one."

[5] "The nature of consciousness, he says, must be understood by contrast with the nature of things. The thing in-itself, *en-soi*; the consciousness is for-itself, *pour-soi.* That is, it *is* nothing; it is not a substance and it has no meaning, although it is the source of all meaning" (ibid., 104).

moral philosophy goes hand-in-hand with the "pseudo-scientific determinism" of the British tradition. "Values which were previously in some sense inscribed in the heavens and guaranteed by God collapse into the human will" (ibid., 366). Freedom is thus identified, states Murdoch, with choice, will, and power; all ironically are compatible with philosophical determinism; there is no longer transcendent reality.

Anti-Kantian and anti-Hegelian, existentialists "fought against the swallowing up of the individual human person...by the world of essences"(ibid., 265). Regardless of this, Murdoch claims, "the younger Sartre and many British moral philosophers represent the last dry distilment of Kant's view of the world" (ibid., 338). Sartre's total man is a "non-historical, non-social and non-determined individual" yet, having his own individual consciousness, resembles the non-historical moral agent of linguistic analysis, to which I now turn.

Linguistic empiricism

"Linguistic moral philosophy operates ... by seeking the meaning of moral concepts in the moment of moral choice, through studying the role which words such as 'good' play in choice situations" (ibid., 267). Linguistic empiricism, described by Murdoch as "ordinary language ethics," seems to be the opposite of existentialism by locating the moral person in a linguistic community wherein morality is viewed as a public, shared institution. However, Murdoch believes this view reflects an inadequate conception of the moral self, rooted in a mistake in the philosophy of mind. This mistake resides in the contention that mental concepts should be analyzed genetically (where the term "genetic" refers to the origins of the concepts in the public domain, as Stuart Hampshire suggests). On this account, we learn the shared concepts by observing their use in public. Suppose we have to learn about the meaning of the word "verdict," for example. To understand the meaning of the word "verdict" we would first need to observe the correlation between the word "verdict" and the action prompted by it (which is publicly noticeable). This is how we learn the operative definition of what verdict means, and if so, according to Murdoch, the word has no "inner structure." If we agree with this view, then the individual's actions and the use of language can be explained only by reference to what is publicly observable. Understanding the action by reference to the objective facts provides the causal explanation of the individual's behavior: "I shall now consider what I think is the most radical argument, the keystone, of this existentialist-behaviorist type of moral psychology: the argument to the effect that mental concepts must be analyzed genetically and so the inner must be thought of as parasitic upon the outer" (ibid., 306). This results in dismissing the *mind* as a "private" arena of reflection, leaving morally relevant *thought* to be but a shadow of such contexts of action. The identification of the mind with publicly observable actions results in a behaviorist account of

morality, because the moral life of the agent is reduced to a set of external choices. The external criteria define the meaning of moral concepts whereas the inner life of the agent is precluded. Such a view is based on the assumption that the world is made of impersonal, objective facts. The word "fact" has the scientific meaning of what can be observed. Therefore, according to Murdoch, "reality is potentially open to different observers. What is 'inward,' what lies in between overt actions, is either impersonal thought or 'shadows' of acts or else substanceless dream … Mental life is, and logically must be a shadow of life in public" (ibid., 304).

The mistake here is not the claim that moral language is originally learned within behavioral contexts (in which the use of moral concepts is governed by shared rules or criteria for the correct apprehension of such concepts) but moral concepts should be developed further by moral persons. For Murdoch, the moral person, while certainly concerned with keeping his promises and fulfilling common duties of everyday life, must also be concerned with the perfecting of her character but perfection of character comes with losing a preoccupation with oneself. This is not something that can only be achieved by empathic projecting, i.e. "goodness" as a determinate concept or goal to which one seeks to come ever closer. Instead, one becomes good in learning to see goodness in others, and this is a matter of learning how to describe or re-describe others using what are usually thought to be "secondary moral terms." Moral concepts are not specifications of the facts combined with recommendations arising from the agent's preferences or choices of value; rather they represent a particular apprehension or grasp of facts according to the moral vision of the agent. The creative and extended use of moral concepts includes not only "good" but also those secondary moral terms that we commonly use to describe our own being and that of others (e.g. brave, funny, vulnerable, arrogant, open-minded etc.). Murdoch gives an example of how secondary moral terms are central to learning moral goodness in others:

> A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter- in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly *common* [my emphasis] yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. ... Let us assume for purposes of the example that the mother, who is a very correct person, behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way ... [thus she behaves 'morally' in terms of common standards of moral decency]. However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her ... M tells herself: Let me look again ... and gradually her vision of D alters ... D is discovered to be *refreshingly simple*, not undignified but *spontaneous*, not noisy but *gay*, not tiresomely juvenile but *delightfully* youthful, and so on (ibid., 312-313).

Terms like "simple," "spontaneous," "gay," "juvenile," "delightful," etc. are terms which are learned in a way which is similar to the way we learn to speak about a particular and

distinctive work of art by using visual imagery or complex metaphors. The contemplation of a work of art is a reflective activity; it involves exploration, discrimination and organized vision. The work of the imagination is very important in the process. Similarly, M in the example is engaged in an activity of thought and imagination while trying to *see* lovingly and justly her daughter in law. The details of this activity, which Murdoch qualifies as "moral," belong to M's personality and it is privately performed: "M's activity is essentially progressive, something infinitely perfectible … As soon as we begin to use words as 'love' and 'justice' in characterizing M, we introduce in 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" (ibid., 318). To an important degree the moral person must learn to see another person for himself, identifying certain things as being especially fine whereas other things count less and so on. I will expand on this idea in the next part of the chapter while developing Murdoch's account of aesthetic perception. Thus Murdoch describes linguistic empiricism as a "lowest common denominator" view of morality due to an impoverished sense of the moral good or goodness that derives from limiting ethical theory to an analysis of universally codified moral judgments or principles removed from specific contexts in which such judgments were made. In a given moral situation, rather we face different reasons for choices that vary in importance. Our reasons and our choices based on them shape our values, that is, what is "good" and thus worthy of being chosen.

Murdoch's understanding of regard for others through aesthetic perception contrasts to the linguistic empiricist' view which is "conventional" (rule-guided and universal), "behaviorist" (the correspondence of the inner acts of the mind with the outer acts), and "liberal" (neo-Kantian-reasoned choice) (ibid., 268). What is missing from such an action-oriented mass morality is the entire realm of moral reflection about humans becoming good, a project that, for Murdoch, is a matter of seeing others as unique persons.

The moral regard for others through aesthetic perception

Murdoch's discontent with previous developments (liberalism, romanticism, existentialism and linguistic empiricism) of the concept of the moral self focuses on the lack of an adequate account of regard for others – an essential aspect of the moral self. To have a proper regard for others is fundamentally a matter of engaging in a performance of an imaginative construal of others' particular understanding of goodness and/or suffering. Attentiveness to, as well as acceptance of others in their particularity, defines love. Love becomes a sensibility to others, which can best be explained, according to Murdoch, in terms of *aesthetic sensibility*.

Aesthetic sensibility is understood as sensitiveness to beauty, both natural and moral. Murdoch's view of ethics is analogous to a particular view of aesthetics. Hence the act of aesthetic appreciation involves the contemplation of a particular object so be it a thing, an event, and other persons as unique. We see/perceive the object as standing in sharp focus out of the rest of the world. We appreciate it for its own sake. The object being contemplated becomes – for the time being – our entire conscious world. Art transcends selfish limitations of personality and can enlarge the sensibility of those who contemplate it.

The crucial question is, "how is *aesthetic sensibility* required for *moral sensibility?* Murdoch makes essential the regard for the very particular characters of others, which is contingent upon the others' seeking to develop and realize their own idea of perfection. It is by way of a close analogy between aesthetic perception and a morally adequate perception of others that Murdoch expresses her view. Aesthetic perception is a fundamental case of moral seeing. It is fundamental because it is instructive for how we should conceive of moral seeing in general. The analogy between aesthetic and moral perception is a resemblance between a fundamental case of moral perception and other, much more common, cases which are to be understood in a similar fashion. It is important to notice that Murdoch is not claiming that persons need a refined aesthetic taste in the usual sense in order to be moral. She is saying that within common morality there is to be seen or discerned a kind of vision or perception of others, which is best, understood theoretically as an "aesthetic perception."

Murdoch's concept of beauty is placed within her analogy between moral sensibility and the sensibility of the novelist as manifested in his act of creation. The analogy is developed in terms of the writer's love unconditionally displayed toward his characters, a love that seeks to see goodness in them and understand their suffering. The writer's sensibility disrupts the natural selfishness of human beings. Through this kind of sensibility, humans can experience a release from self-concern, a revival of the spirit that renders them capable of loving. In virtue of this reviving contemplation of the real others, which is "unselfish, detached, unsentimental and objective," they become free from the enslavement of selfish vision. Art exhibits the connection of vision with compassionate love; this vision does not possess the neutrality of science, but comes from disinterested love.

Beauty is what attracts such an unselfish contemplation, be it for objects of art, nature, or human beings. This feeling of beauty takes the form of a spell which is not available to abstract, theoretical reasoning. The revival of the spirit conferred by such an experience cannot be eroded by time because contemplation of the other transcends common temporal constraints, so that our perception is fixed on the worth of the eternal good that is both moral and beyond us. It is important for Murdoch that the beauty in question is not subjective but is objectively seen in the character of the other, the particular virtues which exhibit their goodness. Thus, the respect for

individuality in the sense of particularity and contingency becomes the virtue of love for Murdoch. The beloved is *other* and *distinct* from the loving subject. The novelist, *tolerant* in his endeavor to display a real apprehension of persons whose existence is separate from himself and crucially important and interesting to themselves, sets *free* his characters. Therefore, great art brings us, if only for a brief moment, into a world more real than our own and such an attitude is required equally, states Murdoch, in moral situations: "Art is the telling of truth, and is the only available method for the telling of certain truths."[6] Good art sharpens one's sensibilities by increasing one's power of understanding and consequently the capacity for empathy with other people.

Murdoch's view of aesthetic perception is largely a reconstruction of Kantian aesthetics and is guided by her concept of the writer's regard for and unconditional love toward his characters. This may be surprising since Kantian aesthetics is well known for the view that judgments of taste are "subjective" but these subjective judgments are universal claims. However, in the case of dependent beauty, there is an objective orientation to the experience, and this is the case which will justify Murdoch's use of terms like "seeing", "vision" etc. in her theory.

Kant's theory of "aesthetic perception" gives distinctively different accounts of the *feeling* of the beautiful and the *feeling* of the sublime (it should be stressed that Kant's conception is not oriented towards *perception* of things as such; it is subjectively oriented). In the case of beauty, attention is directed at the feeling of a harmony between the effort of the imagination to exhibit the form of an object as a whole and the faculty of understanding in the absence of concepts; this feeling of a harmony is, Kant posits, the feeling of a purposiveness without purpose, the form of finality without finality. Kant's favorite examples of this purposiveness without purpose are drawn from nature. To see the beauty of a flower is not to see any perceptible quality *in* the flower but is instead to subjectively organize its perceptible features *as if* it were a thing with a purpose or defined in terms of a purpose.

Two kinds of beauty are important to Kant: *free beauty* and *dependent beauty*. The *pure judgment of taste* concerns free beauty. This feeling of beauty is truly disinterested and is not tied to an idea of the Good or common sensory pleasure. What is beautiful is composed as if with a purpose, and yet it has no purpose which we can name. The experience of free beauty is not driven towards some end and involves no emotion tied up to desires. For Kant, the feeling of the beauty of a flower comes in the sense of a purposive unity in the lines, colors, shapes,

[6] Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince-A Celebration of Love*, (New York: Book- of- the- Month Club, 1999), 58.

fragrance etc. This is a feeling for which no concept can be supplied; rather, the unity is attributed symbolically or metaphorically.

Similarly, nature seems to be purposefully constructed. Flowers, birds, all music that is not set to words are examples of free beauty for Kant. The song of a bird can have more freedom in it than a human voice singing according to all rules that the art of music imposes. Dependent beauty, conversely, contains a purposiveness of form directed at or oriented toward an idea of the goodness of *the object* apprehended as beautiful. The beauty of a man or of a building presupposes a concept of the end that defines what the thing has to be and therefore a concept of its perfection. For example, in the form of a vase, the feeling of its beauty, is to be oriented toward the idea of the fulfillment of its purpose as a vase. Thus a vase whose size, colors, lines etc. are so spectacular as to dwarf the bouquet of flowers, which has been placed in it, will be felt to be lacking in some way. Either one will feel that the bouquet calls for a different vase or that the vase calls for a different bouquet. This feeling of dependent beauty, for Murdoch, is something very close to the feeling that we have for others *when* we properly have a regard for other. There is, however, an important difference: when we strive to see the goodness in others, we begin without a clear idea of their goodness that will fit their speech and actions; indeed, we seek out a purposiveness of form in their lives with respect to an idea of goodness, where hitherto we have seen none. Murdoch does not present a strict concept of the perfection of virtue itself by which to judge the purposiveness of all human actions, character and motives. With no general pattern to follow, each person must struggle to form an idea of his own goodness, an idea which changes and is constituted in the very struggle of becoming a good person. Of course, Murdoch does give us a concept of moral perfection, but regard for others does not refer to this concept as the ground of the goodness or virtue seen in the other. Murdoch's description of what happens to the mother who changes her view of her daughter in law is relevant here. On reflection, mother M comes to see in her daughter D a purposiveness with respect to goods which she identifies by way of the "secondary moral terms."

By using such positive terms as spontaneous, gay, juvenile etc., one identifies virtues of the other, objective qualities which deserve respect. So, in the case of dependent beauty, the purposiveness of form in the lives of others is properly seen. While such qualities are objective and hence have objective truth condition, this does not mean that one simply learns a rule for recognizing the virtues of others. As with beautiful vases, we should rather expect the virtues of persons to be unique or uniquely realized. Because of this, what is important is not learning to apply secondary moral terms as a matter of rule, but learning to extend moral language to fit ever new cases. From this, we can see why Murdoch thinks that the novel is the art form which develops moral language in this way, and when we read such novels, we learn not rules but the art of seeing characters and of seeing people.

At this juncture it might be objected that pure other-regardingness is not solely a matter of regard or respect for the virtues of others. Common moral intuition tells us that perhaps the most important regard for others is that which we should have when they suffer or fail to come up to a supposed standard of virtue. This is where Kant's concept of the sublime should be brought to bear on the reflection about the regard for others, for with the sublime, Murdoch thinks we can apply the concepts of fear and sympathy (which are considered to be traditionally "tragic") to our sense of the misfortunes, failures and blindness of others and of ourselves.

For example, when we look at the starry sky, reason demands that we comprehend the *cosmos* as a whole and indeed we are able to form an idea of the cosmos as a whole, but not a concept. What we cannot do as human beings is synthesize (where "synthesize" means that reason imposes upon us as a law the comprehension of what is before us as totality) our perceptions of the starry sky, as we experience it at some particular time, in order to truly see it or apprehend it as an "object." This inability to synthesize the object of our experience, as reason demands engenders a challenge to our powers initially felt as fear, albeit a pleasurable one if we know ourselves to be safe. This experience, Murdoch interprets, is a mixture of distress given the failure of the imagination to cope with the demands of reason, but at the same time, of elation in our consciousness which realizes the powerful nature of reason which goes beyond what mere imagination can achieve. This experience is very much like *Achtung*, the experience of respect for the moral law (on one hand, we feel pain while contemplating a moral requirement, on the other hand, our rational nature, in the sense of freedom to conform to the absolute requirements of reason, makes us feel delight in our consciousness). For Kant beauty is analogous to the good as it symbolizes the good. Similarly to the judgment of taste, the moral judgment is independent and disinterested. The sublime therefore is much closer to morals because in this experience reason, that is the moral will, is active in the experience. The sublime resembles the exercise of the will in moral judgment whose requirements are unconditional.

Murdoch views Kant's application of the concept of the sublime to nature as trivial. In order to apply Kant's theory of the sublime to moral contexts, Murdoch interprets the sublime as a template for the tragic in life, and, for her, life is not always beautiful; a human life is filled with uncertainties and contingencies, which sometimes disrupt one's effort to give life purposive form with a view to *goodness.* Often we become pathetic when we blindly project ourselves as triumphant heroes in our life story and in the world as a whole. This is the mistake which both romantics and existentialists make in response to the "tragic" element in life, Murdoch believes. They presume that they can make sense of the tragic even if it is at the expense of monumentalizing their own suffering (showing themselves as heroes against the world).

Aristotle thought that the "tragic" emotions, fear and pity, provide a catharsis for the tragic in life, a temporary relief purchased by a few hours spent at the theater,[7] but for Murdoch the tragic emotions represent what ought to be a sustained readiness for the inevitable failure of some of our life prospects, ready also to be morally expressed in fear and sympathy regarding tragedy in the lives of others. She disagrees with Kant's notion that the feeling of the sublime is fundamentally a respect for human power given by reason. On the contrary, for Murdoch, the sublime provides no occasion for pleasure, no impulse to elevate ourselves above the world around us; rather the feeling of the sublime registers the frailty and sometimes even comical blindness of human life.

In sum, for Murdoch, the moral regard for others is fundamentally a matter of trying to see the goodness and the rending of tragedy in the lives of others. Seeing others properly incorporates emotions of respect and compassion that characterize love and such seeing is cognitive love. Love is a dual concept based upon the analogy between the artistic sensibility and moral sensibility. Love has two components: a contemplative one and *Achtung*. Murdoch interprets *Achtung* as an expression of compassion towards the tragedy in the lives of others. Thus for her it is not only a mixture of pleasure and pain while contemplating the moral law; it is part of love we manifest for others in our regard for them. Murdoch sees the connection of the sublime via *Achtung* with Kant's ethical theory in that his theory of the sublime has to be a theory of tragedy. Similarly, Murdoch thinks that Kant's theory of ethics contains no place for the idea of tragedy. Instead, for Murdoch, "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 is the discovery of reality.

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[7] "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious and complete, one that has some greatness. It imitates in words with pleasant accompaniments, each type belonging separately to the different parts of the work. It imitates people performing actions and does not rely on narration. Through pity and fear it achieves purification (*katharsis*) from such feelings" (Aristotle, 1995).

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