“The Extremely Difficult Realization That Something Other Than Oneself Is Real”: Iris Murdoch on Love and Moral Agency

Mark Hopwood (Writing Sample)

1. Introduction

Much of the best work in contemporary moral theory has been concerned with recovering the insights of Aristotle and Kant. On the Aristotelian side, writers including Philippa Foot, John McDowell, and Martha Nussbaum have argued for a return to the concepts of ‘virtue’, ‘character’, and ‘practical wisdom’. On the Kantian side, writers including Barbara Herman, Christine Korsgaard, and David Velleman have developed subtle and complex accounts of ‘duty’, ‘autonomy’, and the ‘rational will’. In recent years, philosophers from both camps have begun to take a renewed interest in the work of Iris Murdoch, but have often found it difficult to know exactly where to place her. Murdoch’s psychological insights, her development of the notion of ‘moral vision’, and her often extraordinarily prescient critiques of emotivism, behaviorism, and existentialism have made her a figure of considerable interest to contemporary philosophers, but her work has sometimes been regarded as eccentric and difficult to understand. In this paper, I will argue that although Murdoch’s writing is not always easy to interpret, the main reason that Aristotelian and Kantian philosophers have had difficulty accommodating her within their theories is that the point of her work is to develop an account of moral agency that is radically different from these theories. It owes

---

1 See McDowell (1998), Nussbaum (1990), and Foot (2000)
3 As the author of 27 novels and winner of the Booker Prize, Murdoch has always been an important figure for scholars of English literature, but since the publication of her collected philosophical essays in 1997 under the title Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature, she has been making something of a comeback among moral philosophers. The recent collection of papers edited by Justin Broakes (2011) includes excellent interpretative essays by Richard Moran, Martha Nussbaum, and Roger Crisp (among many others), and represents the most significant contribution so far to the movement to re-establish Murdoch as a central figure in the recent history of Anglo-American moral philosophy. As Kieran Setiya notes, Murdoch’s status within the discipline of moral philosophy is “hard to make out” (2013, p 1). She is cited as an influence by Charles Taylor, John McDowell, Cora Diamond, Bernard Williams, and Susan Wolf (Setiya’s paper has a useful list of references) but any familiarity that most readers have with her views is most likely to be indirect.
4 Setiya, for example, says that Murdoch’s writing can be “opaque” and her views “obscure” (2013, p 1).
its primary inspiration neither to Aristotle nor to Kant but to Plato, and its central concept is neither
duty nor practical wisdom but love. If this account can be made to stand up in its own right – as I
aim to show that it can – then it will offer us a novel account of a fundamental form of moral
awareness that has so far been left unexplored by Aristotelian and Kantian theorists.

The importance of the concept of love for Murdoch is hard to miss. In her essay ‘On “God” and
“Good”’, Murdoch writes that “we need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely
mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central”.\(^5\) One of my aims in this paper
will be to show that when Murdoch talks about ‘love’, what she has in mind is not \textit{philia} or even
\textit{agape}, but \textit{eros}.\(^6\) In placing the concept of \textit{eros} at the center of her theory, Murdoch is making a self-
conscious effort to draw upon the insights of the Platonic dialogues – in particular the \textit{Symposium}
and the \textit{Phaedrus} – where moral progress is associated with the development of erotic love. It is
important to note that although Murdoch – like Plato – does associate \textit{eros} with sexual love, she
takes it to have a significance that goes far beyond sexual or romantic relationships. When Murdoch
talks about love or \textit{eros}, she does not take herself to be giving an account of a specific kind of
personal, private relationship, but of a fundamental form of moral awareness that colors all of our
relations with others. Indeed, for Murdoch, \textit{eros} is arguably the most fundamental form of moral
awareness. It is \textit{eros} which is responsible for our sense of being subject to a normative demand
imposed upon us from outside the self: what Murdoch memorably describes as “the extremely
difficult realization that something other than oneself is real”.\(^7\)

\(^5\) OGG p 337. I will refer to Murdoch’s works using the following acronyms: IP: The Idea of Perfection; OGG: On
‘God’ and ‘Good’; SG: The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts; SbGd: The Sublime and the Good; MGM:
\textit{Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals}. For the essays, page numbers refer to the collection \textit{Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on
Philosophy and Literature} (1997).

\(^6\) There has been surprisingly little philosophical commentary on Murdoch’s use of the notion of \textit{eros}; Nussbaum (1996)
and (2011) is an exception, although her discussions focus primarily on erotic love in the context of close personal
relationships – part of what I want to argue here is that Murdoch’s understanding of the term is much broader.

\(^7\) SbGd p 215
In the last few years, there have been a number of attempts to assimilate Murdoch’s account of love to an Aristotelian or a Kantian theory of moral agency. In the first part of this paper, I will argue that two of the most prominent such attempts – by Kieran Setiya and J. David Velleman respectively – are unsuccessful. Both Setiya and Velleman base their readings of Murdoch around her association of the concept of love with the concept of vision. Their strategy is to present love as a form of rational awareness of the moral contours of one’s situation (Setiya) or the rational agency of others (Velleman). The problem for both accounts is that Murdoch explicitly and repeatedly contrasts the vision that is occasioned by reason and the vision that is occasioned by love. What distinguishes the latter is a kind of paradox. Loving vision, for Murdoch, consists in part of the awareness of the reality of something beyond what one can see. In the second part of the paper, I offer a positive analysis of Murdoch’s account of love as eros that aims to make sense of this paradox. Although I am concerned to represent Murdoch’s views accurately, my goal here is not primarily exegetical. The reason that it is worth trying to get Murdoch right is that doing so allows us to see the kind of alternative that she is offering to Aristotelian and Kantian theories. As Setiya writes: “If Murdoch is to speak more audibly to contemporary philosophers, so that she cannot be ignored, her ideas must be reframed as interventions in existing disputes, her arguments must be recovered, and her conclusions made clear.” This is the task that I intend to take up here. My presentation of Murdoch’s account of eros will thus be something of a reconstruction, but it is one that I hope is both faithful to the fundamental aims of her work, and that demonstrates why that work ought to be taken seriously by contemporary philosophers.

8 ibid pp 1-2
2. Reading Murdoch as a Rationalist

a) Murdoch and Aristotelianism

In his article ‘Murdoch on the Sovereignty of Good’, Kieran Setiya presents a reading of Murdoch that attributes to her an account of moral vision very similar to the neo-Aristotelian account offered by John McDowell. According to this view, the difference between the virtuous person and the non-virtuous person is that the virtuous person perceives her situation differently. As McDowell writes in his classic 1979 paper ‘Virtue and Reason’ (using the example of the virtue of kindness):

A kind person has a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement that situations impose on behavior. The deliverances of a reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge; and there are idioms according to which the sensitivity itself can appropriately be described as knowledge: a kind person knows what it is like to be confronted with a requirement of kindness. The sensitivity is, we might say, a sort of perceptual capacity.\(^9\)

As Setiya notes, McDowell’s deployment of the metaphor of vision was originally inspired by Murdoch. The following passage from Murdoch’s essay ‘The Idea of Perfection’, cited by Setiya, brings out the similarity quite clearly:

I suggest [that] we introduce into the picture the idea of attention, or looking […] I can only choose within the world I can see, in the moral sense of ‘see’ which implies that clear vision is the result of moral imagination and moral effort. […] One is often compelled almost automatically by what one can see.\(^{10}\)

---

\(^9\) McDowell (1998) p 51
\(^{10}\) IP p 329
This view, according to which the virtuous person sees her circumstances differently from the non-virtuous person, is an intuitive and attractive one. “Its only flaw, you might suspect,” Setiya remarks, “is that it is false, indeed obviously so.” It seems to be a ‘fact of life’, as he puts it, that sometimes people really do see the morally relevant facts before them quite clearly, and still fail to act in accordance with them. For example, imagine a person who is well-known as a chauvinist. He makes lewd comments to female acquaintances, constantly disparages their achievements, and so on. Although people complain to him about his behavior, no amount of criticism seems to make any difference. It’s not that he’s unaware that his comments are chauvinistic – in fact, he positively glories in the title, often introducing himself as a “male chauvinist pig”. It is tempting to say that there is nothing morally relevant that this person is failing to perceive. He sees his chauvinism just as clearly as everyone else – he just doesn’t care about it.

In order to rescue the position that he attributes to McDowell, Setiya thinks that we need to appeal to a further element of Murdoch’s view – what he calls her ‘Platonic theory of concepts’. The basic idea here is this. For any given moral concept, there are at least two ways in which an agent could be said to ‘understand’ it. The first sense is the ‘ordinary, public’ sense in which the agent is capable of using the concept in conversation, deploying it in explanations of her action, etc. The second sense, however, corresponds to a deeper sense of ‘understanding’. Murdoch writes that, in our understanding of certain concepts, “a deepening process, at any rate an altering and complicating process, takes place”.12 This idea is easier to understand in the context of an example. Let us say that our self-proclaimed “male chauvinist pig” finally makes the mistake of uttering a lewd comment in the workplace, and is disciplined and suspended. Before he is allowed to return to work, he is required to attend a series of workshops, part of which consists in a series of video testimonies from

---

11 Setiya (2103) p 8
12 IP p 322
women who had their lives and careers affected by sexism. The experience, as we might say, opens his eyes to what sexism and chauvinism really are. Although he had never denied that he was a chauvinist, and was capable of using the term in conversation, there was a sense in which he had never really understood what chauvinism was. Now that his understanding of the concept has been deepened, his behavior is likely to be altered accordingly. He might not act perfectly, but he is no longer going to go around looking out for opportunities to say something offensive.

The advantage of the Platonic theory of concept, as Setiya understands it, is that the possibility of different levels of understanding allows us to account for a sense in which the virtuous and the non-virtuous agent do have a common conception of their circumstances, and a sense in which they do not. The non-virtuous agent is aware that his actions are chauvinistic, but not in the way that the virtuous person is aware of it. If the non-virtuous person really understood what it meant to act chauvinistically, she wouldn’t do it.13 As Setiya writes:

In outline, the theory is this: each concept is associated with norms for its proper use, both practical and theoretical; these norms describe when the concept should be applied and what follows from its application, both cognitively and in relation to the will; to grasp a given concept is to approximate, in one’s dispositions of thought, a conformity with these norms. Concept-possession thus comes by degree, and points to a limit we may never reach: perfect compliance with the norms by which our concepts are defined.14

The ‘norms’ that Setiya has in mind here are the norms “of practical and theoretical reason”.15 To attempt to perfect one’s grasp of a concept is to aspire to a standard of “ideal rationality”.16 Virtue consists in a kind of conceptual competence, where the truly virtuous agent is the one who sees all

13 This idea is familiar from discussions of judgment-internalism; Setiya describes Murdoch as a “hyper-internalist”.
14 Setiya (2013) p 12
15 ibid p 13
16 ibid p 13
of the aspects of her situation just as they are, and acts in accordance with the relevant moral reasons.

I think that there is much about Murdoch’s view that Setiya’s reading gets right. Here, I want to focus on what he seems to be missing. The most obvious problem is that his interpretation does not seem to leave any role for the concept that Murdoch takes to be a ‘central concept in morals’, i.e. the concept of love. It seems much more natural to understand the kind of conceptual mastery that Setiya attributes to the virtuous agent in terms of the concept that McDowell uses – i.e. phronesis, or practical wisdom. Why should we think that we need love to gain an accurate understanding of the moral contours of our situation? Indeed, why shouldn’t we think that love is precisely the kind of emotion that is likely to get in the way of seeing things as they are? Setiya’s response to this problem is unconvincing. He writes that “the love that interests Murdoch is the love that one should have for one’s neighbor, that is, for anyone with whom one interacts”.\(^17\) Setiya is right to distinguish Murdoch’s use of the concept of love from the usage more familiar in contemporary moral philosophy, where it is generally used to pick out a certain kind of relationship in which I stand to my close friends and family members. As I suggested above, when Murdoch says that the love ‘ought to be a central concept in morals’, her point is not (or at least, not primarily) that we ought to devote more attention to these close familial relationships. It is not clear, however, whether the understanding of love that Setiya attributes to Murdoch has any real content. If love is just the mode of relation that I ought to have towards anyone with whom I interact, what distinguishes it from respect or benevolence? Setiya does not have much to say about these questions. He admits that his analysis must “leave unanswered” the question of “whether we can treat Murdoch’s use of ‘love’ in the moral context as more than quixotic”.\(^18\) The main problem here, as Setiya recognizes, is that love

\(^17\) Setiya (2013) p 19
\(^18\) ibid p 19
is hardly a peripheral concern for Murdoch. What is more, she explicitly contrasts acting lovingly with acting rationally. As she writes: “Will not ‘Act lovingly’ translate ‘Act perfectly’, whereas ‘Act rationally’ will not? It is tempting to say so.”

Setiya’s reading, according to which Murdoch thinks of virtue in terms of the ‘mastery of the norms of theoretical and practical reason’, offers us no way of even beginning to make sense of what might motivate her to make such a claim. At best, then, his interpretation is incomplete; at worst, it appears to attribute to Murdoch a position that she is explicitly committed to denying.

b) Murdoch and Kantianism

David Velleman’s interpretation of Murdoch has one immediate advantage over Setiya’s – it puts the concept of love front and center. One of Velleman’s primary concerns in the article ‘Love as a Moral Emotion’, is to undermine the idea (common to many contemporary critiques of Kantian moral theory) that there is a fundamental tension between love (as a way of seeing particular individuals as special or unique) and morality (as a way of seeing all moral agents as equally valuable). A number of writers have sought to show that the demands of love can be reconciled with the demands of morality, but Velleman thinks that Kantians ought not to settle for this response. "We have made a mistake,” he writes, “as soon as we accept the assumption of a conflict in spirit. Love is a moral emotion precisely in the sense that its spirit is closely akin to that of morality.”

What Velleman finds particularly attractive about Murdoch’s account of love is that – on his reading of her view – love is not a ‘syndrome of motives’ to be with or do things for the object of one’s love, but a detached exercise of truthful vision aimed at seeing the other person ‘as she really is’. The

---

19 SG p 384
20 As, for example, in Herman (1996)
21 Velleman (1999) p 74
following passage from one of Murdoch’s essays (quoted by Velleman) seems particularly congenial to this line of interpretation:

Should a retarded child be kept at home or sent to an institution? Should an elderly relation who is a trouble-maker be cared for or asked to go away? Should an unhappy marriage be continued for the sake of the children? … The love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really looking.22

“If love is indeed a matter of ‘really looking’, Velleman writes, “then it ought to resemble other instances of valuation as vision, including Kantian respect.” 23 The basic idea here is that if love is a matter of “really looking”, then there must be something that the lover is looking at, and the most plausible candidate for this role is that which also functions as the object of respect, i.e. the rational will. Respect and love, for Velleman, are thus “the required minimum and optional maximum responses to one and the same value”.24

On Velleman’s view, then, love and respect take precisely the same object: the rational will. The distinction between them turns on the nature of the “arresting awareness” of rational nature that each provokes. Respect, Velleman writes, checks “our empirical motives – in particular, the motives in whose service we might be tempted to put the person to use”.25 Love, on the other hand, “disarms our emotional defenses – it makes us vulnerable to the other”:

This hypothesis would explain why love is an exercise in “really looking,” as Murdoch claims. Many of our defenses against being emotionally affected by another person are ways of not seeing what is most affecting about him. This contrived blindness to the other person

22 This passage is quoted by Velleman on p 75. The original is in SG p 375.
23 ibid p 77
24 ibid p 101
is among the defenses that are lifted by love, with the result that we really look at him, perhaps for the first time, and respond emotionally in a way that’s indicative of having really seen him.  

There are various concerns that one might raise about Velleman’s view as an account of love. What I want to focus on here are some problems with it as a reading of Murdoch. The best way to see the incompatibility between Murdoch’s position and Velleman’s is simply to quote directly from the passage where she most explicitly contrasts her view with Kant’s. In 'The Sublime and the Good', Murdoch writes:

The short-comings of Kant’s aesthetics are the same as the shortcomings of his ethics. Kant is afraid of the particular. [...] He attempts to make the act of moral judgment an instantiating of a timeless form of rational activity; and it is this, the empty demand for a total order, which we are required to respect in each other. Kant does not tell us to respect whole particular tangled-up historical individuals, but to respect the universal reason in their breasts. In so far as we are rational and moral we are all the same, and in some mysterious sense transcendent to history.

Murdoch does not merely articulate her view in different terms to Kant; she articulates it in opposition to Kant. Velleman actually cites Murdoch’s line about the “realization that something other than oneself is real” in support of his view, but does not include the beginning of the paragraph, which reads: “Let me now briefly and dogmatically state what I take to be, in opposition to Kant’s view, the true view of the matter.” It is hard to imagine a more explicit repudiation of a position than

---

26 ibid p 95  
27 See Kolodny (2003) for an influential critique of Velleman’s view as an account of romantic / familial love. Harcourt (2009) is a perceptive analysis and critique of Velleman’s views on love and rational agency more broadly.  
28 SbGd pp 214-15  
29 ibid p 215
that. What is more, the aspect of Kant’s view that Murdoch rejects is precisely that aspect on which Velleman relies – i.e. the idea of respecting the ‘universal reason’ in the other person’s breast. Whatever Murdoch’s view is supposed to be, it would certainly surprise her to see it presented as compatible with any form of Kantianism.

c) Murdoch and Rationalism

All that I have done thus far is to point out some exegetical concerns about Setiya and Velleman’s readings of Murdoch. I think that these concerns are substantial ones, but it is still open to both Setiya and Velleman to reply that they are simply trying to make the best sense that they can out of Murdoch’s position. In the next section, I want to present my own positive reading of Murdoch’s account of love that will – I hope – show more clearly what the two interpretations that we have considered thus far seem to me to be missing. Here, I want to set that task up by saying something about what these interpretations have in common.

Both the Aristotelian and the Kantian view depend on the notion of an ideally rational – and thus ideally moral – agent. For Setiya, this ideal is understood in terms of the mastery of a set of rational norms governing the use of moral concepts; for Velleman, it is understood in terms of the conformity of the will to the categorical imperative. In each case, however, the ideal agent is one whose perception of her moral situation is complete: there is nothing of moral importance that she fails to see. Her interactions with others are thus characterized by a kind of transparency. Thus Velleman writes that love “opens one’s eyes to what the other really is”; Setiya speaks of a “perfect compliance” with the norms of practical and theoretical rationality. As I have already noted, this understanding of moral agency certainly has something in common with Murdoch’s view, at least insofar as it depends on the idea that moral progress involves coming to see things more clearly. The

\[30\] Velleman (1999) p 96
\[31\] Setiya (2013) p 12
key difference between Murdoch and her rationalist interpreters, however, has to do with the paradox I identified in section 1. Love, for Murdoch, is a form of awareness of the reality of something beyond what one can see. This paradox is stated in various different ways in her work, but the following passages are representative:

(1) We see in our lower things the shadow of higher things, and thereby our continual (daily, hourly, minutely) sense of the connection between the good and the real can lead us to believe in the supreme reality of what is perfect … The part played by love in this seeing is implicit, but again need not be thought of as something unusual, specialized, or remote. All our best activities involve desires which are disciplined and purified in the process. We often long to understand a truth which we already intuit.32

(2) The best commentary on, or supplementary explanation of, the idea is probably given by Plato himself in the *Meno*, the myth of *anamnesis*. The slave solving the geometrical problem is orienting himself towards, bringing his attention to bear upon, something dark and alien, on which light then falls, and which he thereby ‘makes his own’. He ‘sees’ an object invisible but grasped as ‘there’, he is able to concentrate and attend. (To attend is also to wait.) These familiar metaphors are important. It is then as if he always knew it and were remembering it. The process of discovery is to be thought of as accompanied or motivated by a passion or desire which is increased and purified in the process … This is something we can all recognize and which can be illustrated in many different kinds of human activity.33

(3) Simone Weil, with reference to Valery, speaks of ‘an orientation of the soul towards something which one does not know, but whose reality one does know’, and an ‘effort of

---

32 MGM pp 397-98  
33 MGM p 400
attention empty of all content’ which then ‘catches’ its object, as when we try to remember a word.\textsuperscript{34}

The common thread running through these passages seems to me to be the following. Murdoch thinks that we are capable of ‘intuiting’ the existence of something which we do not ‘know’ or ‘understand’. This intuition is made possible not by our mastery of a set of concepts – since we are talking about something that falls outside the boundaries of our conceptual understanding – but by a ‘passion’ or ‘desire’ that is ‘disciplined’, ‘increased’, or ‘purified’ in the process. This desire, I want to suggest, is \textit{eros}. Murdoch is drawing here upon the distinctively Platonic idea – articulated in the \textit{Symposium}, the \textit{Phaedrus}, and also the \textit{Meno} – that \textit{eros} is essential for moral progress, precisely because it allows us to intuit the existence of a form of goodness that lies beyond our current understanding.

All of this, of course, is rather obscure as it stands. In the next two sections, I hope to present a clearer and more systematic account of exactly what Murdoch is trying to say here, first by giving a reconstructed account of the concept of \textit{eros}, and second by working through an example.

3. \textit{Eros and Desire}

\textit{Eros} has generally been regarded by philosophers as a threat to moral progress. Both Aristotle and Kant are deeply suspicious of \textit{eros}, regarding it as a dangerous and irrational drive that ought to be brought under the control of reason.\textsuperscript{35} Part of the reason that Murdoch is interested in \textit{eros} is precisely this moral complexity. Murdoch agrees that \textit{eros} can be dangerous, but she also believes that an adequate account of \textit{eros} in all of its forms would give us a picture of “probably a greater part

\textsuperscript{34} MGM p 401
\textsuperscript{35} Aristotle compares erotic love unfavorably to ‘complete’ or ‘character’ friendship in \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} VIII.4. Kant contrasts the ‘practical love’ which consists in benevolence motivated by duty with the ‘pathological love’ that is motivated by ‘tender sympathy’ in the first section of the \textit{Groundwork}. 
of what we think of as ‘the moral life’.

Murdoch’s account of *eros* is not only complex, but spread across a range of different texts using various different kinds of terminology. The following, then, is my attempt to present the essential features of this account in somewhat more systematic terms.

For Murdoch, *eros* is essentially a form of desire. Sometimes, she gives the impression that the terms ‘desire’ and ‘*eros*’ are interchangeable, but it seems to me that for the most part she has more specific in mind when she talks about *eros*. For the purposes of this discussion, then, I think that it will helpful to use ‘*eros*’ and ‘desire’ to stand for two distinct kinds of attitude. To have a desire, in the sense in which I will use the term here, is to want something that falls under a particular description. For example, if I have a desire for vanilla ice-cream, I will be satisfied by anything that falls under the description ‘vanilla ice-cream’. It doesn’t matter whether you get me a tub from the freezer or a cone from the van outside; as long as what you get me can be described as ‘vanilla ice-cream’, it will satisfy my desire.

*Eros*, in the sense in which I will be using the term, works differently. *Eros* is always directed toward a particular object, and in such a way that no description could adequately capture exactly what it is that I find valuable about that object. It is often observed that romantic love seems to work in this way. If you ask Juliet what she finds lovable about Romeo, she can certainly give you a list of his qualities, but she will not be satisfied if you propose to take Romeo away from her and replace him with another person, even if that other person could be guaranteed to possess all of the qualities that she had listed (and any others that she may subsequently realize that she had forgotten). Similar observations have also been made in the case of aesthetic beauty. We expect words to fail us when we

---

36 MGM p 497
37 In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* she writes: “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.” (p 496)
38 This problem is one that is widely recognized in contemporary discussions of romantic love. See Kolodny (2003) and Jollimore (2011)
attempt to describe just what it is that we love about a particular landscape or piece of music. Again, the point is not that there is nothing that we could say in such cases, but no description could be said to capture the object of our eros in the way that the description ‘vanilla ice-cream’ captures the object of a desire.  

In order to represent this distinction between eros and desire, I will say that whereas the object of desire can be brought under a closed description, the object of eros can only be brought under an open-ended description. For a description to be ‘open-ended’ is for it to be acknowledged as incomplete, partial, or provisional. An open-ended description is an attempt to imaginatively represent the value of an object of eros, where it is understood that the description does not capture the value of the object in the way that a closed description does. Imagination thus conceived needs to be distinguished from invention. When I try to explain what I find beautiful about the Lake District, I draw upon my imagination, not because I don’t know what it looks like and need to invent a description, but because what I find beautiful about it cannot be captured in any straightforward way. If you ask me to describe the Lake District to you, I need to try to find a way of picturing it that will give you some sense of the beauty that I find in it. Imagination is thus both creative and personal; the description of the Lakes that I give to you may be very different from the description that I give to someone else. The difference in these descriptions need not imply that either of them is any less truthful, since the point is not simply to enumerate a list of qualities, but to bring about what the philosopher of criticism Arnold Isenberg calls “sameness of vision”. Imaginative discourse aims not only to represent its object, but to represent it in such a way as to stimulate a certain kind of response on the part of the hearer – i.e. the response of eros.

---

39 The discussion of ‘critical communication’ in Isenberg (1973) is particularly helpful on this point.  
40 Murdoch discusses the role of moral imagination in numerous places, but at most length in chapter 11 (‘Imagination’) of Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals  
41 Isenberg (1973) p 163
A further distinction to be made between *eros* and desire is that the object of *eros* imposes a kind of *normative demand* on the subject that the object of desire does not. In his article ‘Kant, Proust, and the Appeal of Beauty’, Richard Moran brings out this point particularly clearly in his discussion of what it means to respond with love to an object of beauty:

> When Plato or Mary Mothersill claim an internal relation between beauty and love, this needn’t be understood as either sentimentalizing or inflating the experience of the beautiful, but rather a recognition of the conceptual difference between something’s being a value because it answers to my needs and recognizing something whose claim on me is independent of my needs, a value to which my needs and desires are themselves answerable.\(^{42}\)

The distinction that Moran is drawing upon here is that between the beautiful and the ‘merely agreeable’. For an object to be agreeable is for it to answer to my ‘needs and desires’ – for example the desire for vanilla ice-cream. For an object to be beautiful, on the other hand, is for it to set a kind of *normative standard* for my desires to meet. Part of what it means for a piece of music to be beautiful is for it to *merit* the pleasure that I take in it. Furthermore, it is possible for me to feel that there is room for me to *get better at* appreciating it – that my desires could change in a way that would bring them into closer correspondence with the object itself. As Moran writes:

> [It] belongs to the beautiful, but not to the agreeable, that there can be types of response or ways of treating the thing, that are called for, merited, or owed to it, and hence that there are possibilities for characteristic *failures* of response, or repudiations of the appeal, that have no place in our relation to the things we consume.\(^{43}\)

\(^{42}\) Moran (2012) p 321

\(^{43}\) ibid p 321
There is an important connection between the normative demand imposed by the object of \textit{eros} and the role of imagination in describing such objects. An open-ended imaginative description can be seen as an attempt to meet the normative demand imposed by the object of \textit{eros} by reorienting the desires and affective responses of the subject in a way that will bring them into closer correspondence with the object itself. If you and I are having a discussion of a painting in a gallery, and I think that you are not quite appreciating it in the way that it deserves, then I may attempt to come up with a description of what is beautiful about it that will help you to engage with it in a different way. For example, I might tell you to look at the way the light is dancing, or the way in which the depth of the blue almost seems to draw you into the picture. Such descriptions are best understood as imaginative attempts to help you to meet the normative demand that I take the beauty of the painting to impose, by bringing your desires and affective responses into closer correspondence with that beauty.\footnote{This account of \textit{eros} in the aesthetic realm is obviously not an uncontroversial one. I do not have the space to discuss the relevant issues here; they are explored in more depth in chapter one of my dissertation.}

With these distinctions between desire and \textit{eros} in mind, we can say that \textit{eros} is (i) a form of desire that is (ii) directed at a particular object whose value (iii) cannot be captured under a closed description, that (iv) engages the imagination, and that (v) carries with it the awareness of a normative demand on the desires of the subject. Murdoch thinks that \textit{eros} thus conceived is a central aspect of our romantic and aesthetic experience, but her most radical claim is that it is also a central aspect of our moral experience. The best way to understand what this means is to consider an example. Murdoch’s interpreters almost always base their readings around the famous story of the mother and daughter-in-law in ‘The Idea of Perfection’, but I am going to steer clear of that example here. Murdoch is trying to make a very specific point with the story of M and D, and her description
of the case is deliberately stylized as a result.\textsuperscript{45} In order to avoid the interpretative difficulties involved in working out exactly what Murdoch is trying to do with M and D, I am going to use a different example. It is one that was originally put forward by another philosopher, but I think that it does a good job of bringing out some of Murdoch’s most fundamental concerns.

4. Moral Eros

In Raimond Gaita’s book \textit{A Common Humanity} he tells the story of an experience that he had while working at a psychiatric hospital in Australia in the 1960s. Conditions, although standard for the time, were poor. As Gaita writes: “When patients soiled themselves, as some did often, they were ordered to undress and step under a shower. The distance of a mop handle from them, we then mopped them down as zoo-keepers mop down elephants.”\textsuperscript{46} Although the patients, who were judged to be ‘incurable’, were often treated badly by the psychiatrists and nurses, there were some psychiatrists who “[worked] devotedly to improve their conditions”.\textsuperscript{47} These psychiatrists, Gaita recalls, “spoke, against all appearances, of the inalienable \textit{dignity} of [the] patients”.\textsuperscript{48} Although Gaita “admired them enormously”, he admits to a certain degree of skepticism about these psychiatrists’ claims about dignity. To the extent that dignity is recognizable as something of value, he points out, it is \textit{not} something inalienable – it can be taken away from us. “Like the protestation of rights to which it is allied,” he writes, “it will survive only if one is spared the worst”.\textsuperscript{49} The problem for the patients, in Gaita’s view, was precisely that their dignity \textit{bad} been taken away from them: “they had

\textsuperscript{45} Murdoch is responding to a view according to which the ‘inner life’ of an individual has no moral importance whatsoever; the only things that are of moral importance, on this view, are observable actions. The primary purpose of the mother and daughter-in-law story is to give an example of an inner activity (the mother’s changing view of the daughter-in-law) with moral value. One of the artificial devices that Murdoch uses to make this point is to stipulate that D either goes overseas or dies (it doesn’t matter which), so that M’s change in vision is not at all reflected in her external behavior. See IP p 312.

\textsuperscript{46} Gaita (2000) p 17

\textsuperscript{47} ibid p 18

\textsuperscript{48} ibid p 18

\textsuperscript{49} ibid p 18
no grounds for self-respect insofar as we connect that with self-esteem; or, none which could be based on qualities for which we could admire or congratulate them”.

One day, Gaita writes, a nun came to visit the ward:

In her middle years, only her vivacity made an impression upon me until she talked to the patients. Then everything in her demeanor towards them – the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body – contrasted with and showed up the behavior of those noble psychiatrists. She showed that they were, despite their best efforts, condescending, as I too had been. She thereby revealed that even such patients were, as the psychiatrists and I had sincerely and genuinely professed, the equals of those who wanted to help them; but she also revealed that in our hearts we did not believe this.

It is important to be clear exactly what kind of comparison Gaita is trying to make between the nun and the psychiatrists. It would be easy to take him simply to be accusing the psychiatrists of failing to make their actions live up to their words, but that is not the point here. As Gaita writes:

I admired the psychiatrists for their many virtues – for their wisdom, their compassion, their courage, their capacity for self-sacrificing hard work and sometimes for more besides. In the nun’s case, her behavior was striking not for the virtues it expressed, or even for the good it achieved, but for its power to reveal the full humanity of those whose afflictions had made their humanity invisible. Love is the name we give to such behavior.

I think that there is something intuitively plausible about Gaita’s claim that the nun’s behavior can only be explained as an instance of love, but it is hard to say exactly why that is. Murdoch’s theory of

---

50 ibid p 17
51 ibid pp 18-19
52 ibid p 20
moral *eros* provides us with an answer. The psychiatrists’ response to the patients is grounded in a perceived quality of the latter – i.e. their inalienable dignity. To put it in the terms developed in the previous section, the psychiatrists see the patients under a *closed description*. They take the patients to merit a certain kind of treatment *in virtue of* their dignity. The nun’s response is different. There is no particular quality in virtue of which she takes the patients to merit a certain kind of treatment. Her response is based on the perception of a value that cannot be brought under a closed description. It does not depend upon seeing the patients as possessing dignity, or the capacity for rational self-governance, or any other particular quality. To that extent, it is a case of moral *eros*.

As we have seen, the fact that the object of *eros* cannot be captured under a closed description does not mean that there is nothing that can be said about it. What the nun’s behavior reveals, Gaita’s writes, is that the patients “are the equals of those who wanted to help them”.\(^{53}\) It is natural to assume here that there *must* be some independently identifiable quality in virtue of which the patients and the psychiatrists are seen to be equals, but Gaita seems to deny this. As he writes: “To speak of the patients as ‘fully our equals’ is not, even implicitly, to pick out something about them that could be known or even specified independently of this kind of love.”\(^{54}\) What exactly does this mean? I think that we can clarify Gaita’s claim by returning to the comparison with the aesthetic case. Let us say that I have been trying for a long time to appreciate J.M.W. Turner’s paintings, and have regularly defended their status as great works of art, but still don’t quite see the beauty in them. One day, I go along to an exhibition with an old friend, and as we stand in front of one of the Turner paintings on display, she begins to talk about her response to the work. She talks about the elegance of the composition and the subtlety of the color, but she also talks about how it makes her feel – about how it reminds her of summer days when the two of used to play in the rain together as

\(^{53}\) ibid p 19
\(^{54}\) ibid p 20
children. As we stand there talking about the picture, I begin to see it differently. For the first time, I am able to say that I do not merely recognize it as a great work of art, but that I see its beauty.

We can apply this case to Gaita’s claim in the following way. When my friend says that the Turner painting reminds her of summer days in the rain, she is trying to give an explanation of what she finds beautiful about it. This explanation, however, has a particular purpose: i.e. to allow me to engage imaginatively with the painting in a way that will help me to see it differently. Her description, to use the term introduced in the last section, is an open-ended one – it is a provisional and incomplete description designed to orient the attention of the hearer toward a value that cannot be captured under a closed description. We might say that my friend’s love for the painting, which is manifest in both her words and her actions, illuminates its beauty. Similarly, the nun’s love for the patients, which is manifest primarily in her actions but also in her words, illuminates their full humanity. When she describes them as ‘fully equal’ to herself, her actions give meaning to those words that they would not have if they were spoken in a different context. That, I take it, is what Gaita means when he says that the nun’s words do not pick out a quality that could be known or specified independently of her love.

This example is an extreme one, of course. It provides us with a particularly good example of moral eros precisely because it is one in which the idea that others merit our moral concern in virtue of their possession of certain qualities seems less plausible than it does in other cases. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that moral eros is not only an attitude that we take up toward others whose condition has reached an extreme state of wretchedness. Murdoch’s view, I take it, is that it is always possible for us to be aware of others as possessing a value that cannot be captured under a closed description. To say this, however, is neither to deny that we very often do think of our moral
responsibilities to others under a closed description, nor indeed to deny that it is often necessary and appropriate for us to do so. As Murdoch writes:

I have several times indicated that the image which I am offering should be thought of as a general metaphysical background to morals and not as a formula which can be illuminatingly introduced into any and every moral act. There exists, as far as I know, no formula of the latter kind. We are not always the individual in pursuit of the individual, we are not always responding to the magnetic pull of perfection. Often, for instance when we pay our bills or perform other small everyday acts, we are just ‘anybody’ doing what is proper or making simple choices for ordinary public reasons; and this is the situation which some philosophers have chosen exclusively to analyse.\footnote{IP p 334}

There is a chapter of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* entitled ‘Axioms, Duties, Eros’ in which Murdoch argues that different areas of moral life require different kinds of images of goodness. Sometimes, we need general, axiomatic claims that are taken as starting points for any discussion (statements about human rights and the principle of utility are Murdoch’s examples); sometimes, we need a conception of duty as an inflexible limit on moral judgment. Murdoch’s view, I think, is that these areas of morality have received more than enough attention from modern philosophers, and that the idea of *eros* – “the continual operation of spiritual energy, desire, intellect, love, as it moves among and responds to particular objects of attention, the force of magnetism and attraction that joins us to the world”\footnote{MGM p 496} – has been unduly neglected.
5. The Ambiguity of Eros

Murdoch’s account of moral eros, as we have seen, is not presented as a decision theory designed to generate substantive conclusions about how we should act. Rather, it is intended to illuminate aspects of moral agency that simply go missing on other theories. What is particularly interesting about eros, on Murdoch’s account, is its moral ambiguity. Although love, in its highest form, is “practically identical with goodness”, it is also “capable of infinite degradation” and is “the source of our greatest errors”. The best way to understand the kind of process of degradation that Murdoch has in mind here is by means of examples. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the collapse of eros is one of the principal subjects of Murdoch’s 26 novels. In those novels, we see the process take place in the following contexts (rather than going through specific cases in detail, I simply list one or two novels that offer particularly striking depictions of the phenomena in question):

**Sexual eros** is the desire for another person, and in particular for his body, conceived of as something separate from oneself, something mysterious, covered up, or otherwise unattainable. The goal of sexual eros is for the removal of these barriers – for the union of the self with the other. The familiar risk of sexual eros is objectification, whereby the body of the other person ceases to become mysterious and unattainable, and instead becomes a mere vehicle for the satisfaction of desire. (*The Black Prince, A Fairly Honourable Defeat*)

**Romantic eros** is the desire for another person, again conceived of as mysterious and separate from oneself. As with sexual eros – with which it is obviously connected – romantic eros aims at a kind of union, only this time spiritual rather than physical, with the object of love. The risk of romantic eros is idealization or fantasy – falling in love with an image that
becomes detached from the real person, and to which the real person may fail to measure up. (*The Sea, The Sea*)

**Artistic eros** is the desire for an object of beauty (or broader aesthetic interest). The aim of artistic *eros* is to represent the object in some specific form, whether poetic, visual, musical, etc. The danger of artistic *eros* – which most interests Murdoch, perhaps unsurprisingly, in the case of the novel – is that the demands of form will lead to a falsification of the object (for example, when a character ceases to appear ‘realistic’ because it becomes clear that her personality has been constructed solely to serve the demands of the plot). (*Under the Net*)

**Religious eros** is the desire for God, or for the divine, conceived of as transcendent and mysterious. The goal of religious *eros* is to come to some understanding of God, and through that understanding to develop a relationship with God, whether through prayer, religious observance, or some other means. The distinctive danger of religious *eros* is idolatry, where the image (which is often an image of the self) comes to replace God as the object of worship. (*The Bell*)

These examples help to bring out a paradox that is central to Murdoch’s work – i.e. that *eros* has a natural tendency to bring about its own destruction. *Eros* in its sexual, romantic, aesthetic, and religious forms is a response to a value that cannot be captured under a closed description. In our experience of each of these forms of *eros*, we use open-ended descriptions as imaginative, creative attempts to make sense of the value to which we take ourselves to be responding, and to help others to see that value in the same way. The danger is that we will begin to treat these open-ended descriptions as closed descriptions – i.e. that we will begin to treat them as lists of qualities in virtue of which the object is valuable. In other words, the object of *eros* begins to function more like an object of desire. When an open-ended description begins to be treated as a closed description, the
value of the object becomes dependent on its possession of a particular set of qualities, and logical space is opened up for the thought that, if the object were to cease to possess this quality, it would no longer be valuable. Religious idolatry depends on the possibility of giving a closed description of the qualities a god must possess in order to be worthy of worship; sexual objectification depends on the possibility of giving a closed description of the physical characteristics a body must possess in order to arouse desire. The eventual consequence of this process is the loss of *eros* itself. A body that is sexually objectified loses the mystery that first made it attractive; a religious doctrine that has become hardened into idolatry ceases to function as an object of wonder and reverence.

What Gaita’s example makes clear is that these dangers are equally present in the case of moral *eros*. There is nothing wrong, on Murdoch’s view, with talking about the dignity of rational agency as a way of understanding the moral value of human beings, but when dignity begins to be seen as the quality *in virtue of which* other human beings are valuable, logical space opens up for the question of whether a given individual really possesses the requisite dignity to qualify as the object of moral concern. Recall Gaita’s description of the effect of the nun’s behavior toward the patients:

> [Everything] in her demeanor towards them – the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body – contrasted with and showed up the behavior of those noble psychiatrists. She showed that they were, despite their best efforts, condescending, as I too had been. She thereby revealed that even such patients were, as the psychiatrists and I had sincerely and genuinely professed, the equals of those who wanted to help them; but she also revealed that in our hearts we did not believe this.\(^\text{58}\)

Gaita and the psychiatrists had come to see the patients under a closed description – i.e. as valuable in virtue of their dignity. To see them in this way, however, was to open up logical space for the

\(^{58}\) ibid pp 18-19
thought that perhaps these patients were *not* equal in value to other human beings, since their dignity (such as it was) had been taken away from them. This is what Gaita means, I think, when he says that the nun “revealed that in our hearts we did not believe [that the patients were our equals]”. The fact that the question of the moral status of the patients could even *arise* here is precisely what separated Gaita and the psychiatrists from the nun. To say that she responded to the patients with love is to say that the question of their value could not arise for her, since there was no set of qualities in virtue of which she took her response to be merited.

It is tempting to think that, if there really was no set of qualities in virtue of which the nun took her response to the patients to be merited, then her response must have been an arbitrary one. The best reply to this objection is to consider whether it would make sense to say the same thing in the case of aesthetic or romantic *eros*. The fact that Juliet cannot give a list of qualities in virtue of which Romeo merits her love does not make her love arbitrary. On the contrary, the fact that she cannot capture Romeo’s value under a closed description is part of what motivates us to say that she loves him. Love is not a matter of mere arbitrary preference, but neither is it a matter of fully reasoned choice. It is, as Plato writes in the *Symposium*, “something in between”.\(^{59}\) Seeing the value of an object of love requires more than the correct application of a set of concepts. It requires what Murdoch calls ‘attention to the individual’. This, as the following passage makes clear, is the source of her most fundamental disagreement with Kant:

> Kant [in his description of *Achtung* – i.e. reverence] was marvelously near the mark. But he thought of freedom as the aspiration to a universal order consisting of a prefabricated harmony. It was not a tragic freedom. The tragic freedom implied by love is this: that we all have an infinitely extended capacity to imagine the being of others. Tragic, because there is

\(^{59}\) *Symposium* 202b
no prefabricated harmony, and others are, to an extent we never cease discovering, different from ourselves. Nor is there any social totality within which we can come to comprehend differences as placed and reconciled. We only have a segment of the circle. Freedom is exercised in the confrontation by each other, in the context of an infinitely extensible work of imaginative understanding, of two irreducibly dissimilar individuals. Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness.\footnote{SbGd p 214}

6. Conclusion

In the last two sections, I hope to have gone some way to clarifying Murdoch’s claim that “love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real”. To say that love is a realization of something ‘real’ is to say that it reveals the existence of a value that – like the beauty of a work of art – does not merely answer to my needs and desires, but sets a standard to which my needs and desires are themselves answerable. To say that this realization is ‘extremely difficult’ is to say that this value is one that cannot be brought under a closed description, but requires an effort of imaginative engagement directed at something existing beyond what I am currently capable of seeing. It is for this reason that Murdoch’s account of love has proved so difficult to accommodate within rationalist theories. According to both the neo-Aristotelian and the neo-Kantian, the ideal moral agent is precisely one who is capable of bringing her moral situation under a closed description. Murdoch is not opposed to the idea that the development of the capacity for practical rationality is an essential aspect of moral progress, but she does not believe that moral progress can be understood solely in terms of an ideal of rationality. Love, as a recognition of otherness, is a recognition of the limits of practical rationality.
Part of what Murdoch has in mind when she describes love as “difficult”, I think, is that it requires a certain kind of humility. Contrary to the impression given by much modern moral philosophy, the central problem of moral life is not that we lack interest in acting well. It is that we are too sure that we already know what acting well consists in. For other people to be “real” in the sense that interests Murdoch is for them to be capable of disturbing our sense of what it would be to act well toward them. Love, as a recognition of that reality, is an awareness of unknowing – of being drawn toward a value that cannot be brought under a closed description. This account of love does not give us the whole story about moral agency – we still need an account of practical rationality of the kind that Aristotelian and Kantian scholars have been concerned to provide – but it does give us a fundamental part of the story that modern moral philosophy has too long ignored.

Works Cited


