An Understanding with the Reader

The body of text that here follows is a draft of a part of a longer essay (or is it a chapter in a book?) The text as a whole focuses on the idea of a text as a mirror. More generally, it tries to make clear the form of the philosophical problem that is argued to require a mirroring strategy. I take aim from a classic aphorism of Lichtenberg’s:

A book is a mirror: if an ape looks into it an apostle is hardly likely to look out. We have no words for speaking of wisdom to the stupid. He who understands the wise is wise already. (G. C. Lichtenberg)

The mirror analogy has been adopted by both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard respectively in talking about how philosophy must (at times) be written if the right thought is to be conveyed. This thought is also, I argue, adopted by Iris Murdoch. What you are about to read is part of my discussion of Murdoch.

At times I refer back to things I have previously clarified – employing, for example, concepts such as “illusion of sense”, “aesthetic reflection”, “subjective”, “objective”, and “indirect communication”. Hopefully my text will be readable without the previous sections. However, if anyone feels the he or she would like to read the first part of this text, just pass me an e-mail (niklas.forsberg@filosofi.uu.se) and I’ll send it to you.

The structure of the text as a whole (today) looks this (you’re about to read sections 5—7):

1. Introduction: What is a Mirror?
2. Wittgenstein and the Difficulty of Acknowledging Illusions of Sense
3. Kierkegaard and Grammatical Illusions
4. Mirroring Illusions: The Thought of the Indirect Communication
5. Murdoch: Sensing a Sense Lost
6. Vision over Choice
7. Making Pictures (Perfectionism and Vision)
8. The Place of Literature
9. Smashing Mirrors: Beginning to Collect

All the best, Niklas

How to Make a Mirror:
On Convincing Reflections

or,
“Don’t worry. It’s double spaced, so you’re already half-way through!”

Part 2

Niklas Forsberg

Murdoch: Sensing a Sense Lost

In Iris Murdoch’s view, as in Kierkegaard’s and Wittgenstein’s, many of our philosophical problems have a particular form that require that we, if we are to come to terms with them, constantly need to train, educate, re-think and re-educate ourselves concerning the conceptual connections of our everyday language. This does not mean that the philosopher should, as it were, try to stay modern – follow trends, etc. – but, rather, that he or she must be aware of how cultural changes initiates, and come together with, changes in meaning. In a sense, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein were anything but trendy. (Some even like to think of them, wrongly in my view, as conservative.) This sensitivity to our developments and alterations in the language/praxis patterns of our lives might very well be reached from a certain form of distance. But I do not mean to argue – obviously – that we should take a detached an impersonal stance towards our language.

What I mean is that the philosopher must not let herself be swept away, merely tagging along, as it were. (The call for self-criticism again.)
Murdoch was never swept away in this sense. In fact, one might say that she stayed in a constant critical relation to contemporary culture and philosophy – hence her call for a deepened conceptual sensitivity. She too held the view that “Philosophy, like newspapers, is both the guide and the mirror [that word again] of its age.”\(^1\)

We live in a scientific and anti-metaphysical age in which the dogmas, images and precepts of religion have lost much of their power. We have not recovered from two wars and the experience of Hitler. We are also the heirs of the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Liberal tradition. These are elements of our dilemma: whose chief feature, in my view, is that we have been left with far too shallow and flimsy an idea of human personality.\(^2\)

We have seen how both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard can fruitfully be seen as philosophers who claim that (many) philosophical problems arise because we have forgotten a certain sense of our words – and yet we continue to use them without hesitation, by habit as it were, as if we were in full command of them. We now hear Murdoch saying something very similar: Something in our form of life has changed in such a way that we are left with a too shallow and flimsy idea of what a person is. But how can we forget that? Don’t we all know what a person is? Don’t you know what to say if someone asks you what a human being is?

You probably do have some things to say. The question is, do what you say about the nature of a human being also guide your thinking and research – your life as a whole – or are there other pictures of the human that your thinking really (but, perhaps implicitly) presuppose and work (probably unwittingly) to support, pass on and establish? Are the theoretical pictures of the human being that we make of ourselves in touch with how we actually do lead our lives? There might be a discrepancy between the picture and the real here. The problem is that a confused picture can become a very real reality. (This is one way of saying that or theoretical elaborations of ourselves do matter.) Murdoch’s view was that the picture of the human that we now employ and pass on is a confused concept, indeed, a forgotten concept, bordering the senseless.

We have suffered a general loss of concepts, the loss of a moral and political vocabulary. We no longer use a spread-out substantial picture of the manifold virtues of man and society. We no longer see man against a background of values, of realities which transcend him. We picture man as a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world. For the hard idea of truth we have substituted a facile idea of sincerity. (…) We have never solved the problems about human personality posed by the Enlightenment. Between the various concepts available to us the real question has escaped (…).\(^3\)

Murdoch is not saying that we lack a concept of man altogether. Her claim is that we have, unwittingly, adopted a specific picture of man as the picture of man, which amounts to a delimiting form of reductionism. By adopting this reductionistic picture of man we have disabled serious moral reflection.

As I read Murdoch, she is not saying that everyone but her has lost this sense. Rather, it is a description of a state of a culture we are in (and hence, a state of culture that she is in too).\(^4\) Murdoch uses the (seemingly sweeping) first person plural. Thus, this picture of man that disables a certain form of reflection on the moral life of the human animal concerns all of us. Somewhere along the line, after the Enlightenment, “we” suffered a general loss of concepts. This cannot possibly mean a collective amnesia (at least not in any straightforward sense). Rather, what is at stake is something very similar to the stories I have told about Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard. Our self-understanding

---


\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Murdoch, “Against Dryness”, p. 290.

have evolved, and with that evolution – an evolution that includes e.g. the Enlightenment ideology, the idea of the Liberal man, world wars, secularization, economization, rationalization, and a very strong belief in scientific methods – comes a slight shift of meaning in our moral vocabulary.

What really troubles Murdoch can perhaps be described as if the line of communication has been broken. Being a philosopher, or thinker, or intellectual, or writer, who reflects upon morality has come to mean something very specific. The “object” of moral philosophy, the moral life of the human, is a certain picture of the human, and if you don’t share that vision of what the human is, you cannot do “serious” moral thinking. As Murdoch says, “[i]f the common object is lacking, communication may break down and the same words may occasion different results in different hearers.” That is one aspect of her thought that needs to be dealt with.

We started to depict the human as “a brave naked will” – we wanted the human to be rational and in total control. Now we have, Murdoch seems to claim, come to resemble that picture. (One should be careful with one’s wishes…) To paraphrase Kierkegaard: we now relate to and live in “humandom”, not “humanity”. I think that it is fruitful to think of this evolution in terms of a slow forgetting. It is more a case of a fading away than a blow to the head. It is the slowness of it, the fact that it is not really done, implemented by someone, which provides the illusion that we are still – throughout the changes of our forms of life (and hence the sense of our words) – talking about “the same thing”.

This means that the sense of the human lost is not easily accessible. Thus, let us begin with the picture of the human that we do understand (but which, in a sense, harbors an illusion of sense, caused by a certain form of forgetting).

We ought to know what we are doing. We should aim at a total knowledge of our situation and a clear conceptualization of all our possibilities. (…) My responsibility is a function of my knowledge (which tries to be wholly impersonal) and my will (which is wholly personal). Morality is a matter of thinking clearly and then proceeding to outward dealings with other men.

On this view one might say that morality is assimilated to a visit to a shop. I enter the shop on a condition of totally responsible freedom, I objectively estimate the features of the goods, and I choose. The greater my objectivity and discrimination the larger the number of products from which I can select. Both as act and reason, shopping is public.5

This is, according to Murdoch’s bantering picture of the modern man, how we picture ourselves. It is the man of today. It is not a flattering picture; it’s not meant to be. She pictures us as ridiculous.

The particular kind of forgetfulness that I think lingers in Murdoch’s thinking here – concerning this loss of concepts – differs somewhat from the forms of forgetfulness I have discussed above, particularly in relation to Kierkegaard. For in the case of Kierkegaard, one might say that his contemporaries did no longer lead the specific kind of life that “enabled” them to mean what they thought they (already) meant. And it is clear that Kierkegaard had an agenda. He was a Christian. He wanted people to be Christians. And he did deceive them. Of course, he did not think that he was in a position to lead them right or home, but he did think he was in a position to show them, by means of slightly deceitful textual strategies, that they were confused or lost. The

---


thoughts were in a sense there (in Kierkegaard), it’s just the practice that has gone missing (in every other Dane). 7

For Murdoch, there is no special practice gone missing – say leading a religious life of a particular sort. Her problems are, as I understand them, actually bigger than that. It is the fact that even though we still need to be able to reflect upon and understand our own morality we have begun to use language in a way that blocks the possibility of such an understanding. In that sense, the form of life in which these concepts belong is ever so present! This means that the practice is already in place, it is (the sense of) our words that are lacking – forgotten.

Even though the decay that Murdoch displays differs somewhat from Kierkegaard’s, the path into illusion shares important similarities. We have lost sense of the complexities of the human life in language, and so we need to remind ourselves of how we actually lead our lives in language. Thus, Murdoch aims to “attempt a movement of return, a retracing of our steps to see how a certain position was reached” in search for

7 Yes, Kierkegaard was a deceptive scoundrel, but not in the sense of trying to trick his fellow Danes to believe. Remember that, as Conant says, it is by their own lights that they fail to be Christians. And remember that Kierkegaard’s view is that no one can lead someone else into an authentic religious life. Noteworthy, Kierkegaard’s only aim was to make his readers aware of the existence of the illusion. “Compel a person to an opinion, a conviction, a belief—in all eternity, that I cannot do. But one thing I can do, in one sense the first thing (since it is a condition for the next thing, to accept his view, conviction, belief, in another sense the last thing if he refuses the next: I can compel a person to become aware.” (Kierkegaard, The Point of View of My Work as an Author, p. 464.) Notice also that Kierkegaard claims that “what follows from this [awareness] no one can predict.” (Ibid., p. 465.) And, of course, we should not think that the word “deception” has one and only one meaning either: “From the point of view of my whole work as an author, the aesthetic writing is a deception, and herein is the deeper significance of pseudonymity. But a deception, that is indeed something rather ugly. To that I would answer: Do not be deceived by the word deception. One can deceive a person out of what is true, and – to recall old Socrates—one can deceive a person into what is true. (…) Direct communication presupposes that the recipient’s ability to receive is entirely in order, but here that is simply not the case – indeed, here a delusion at face value. Thus, one does not begin (…) in this way: I am a Christian, you are not a Christian – but this way: You are a Christian, I am not a Christian. Or one does not begin in this way: It is Christianity I am proclaiming, and you are living in purely aesthetic categories. No, one begins this way: Let us talk about the aesthetic.” (Ibid., p. 467.)

The picture of man that she claims underlies and guides modern moral philosophy is, Murdoch argues, visible in several forms of moral discourse.

The very powerful image with which we are here presented is behaviourist, existentialist, and utilitarian in a sense which unites these three conceptions. It is behaviourist in its connection of the meaning and being of action with the publicly observable, it is existentialist in its elimination of the substantial self and its emphasis on the solitary omnipotent will, and it is utilitarian in its assumption that morality is and can only be concerned with public acts. It is also incidentally what may be called a democratic view, in that it suggests that morality is not an esoteric achievement but a natural function of any normal man. 8

The question is how this picture of man (as being essentially a “rational agent” whose moral life essentially consists of freely choosing objectively in a world of empirical “facts”) has taken such a strong grip on our self-understanding. Again, Kierkegaard’s and Wittgenstein’s thoughts go hand in hand with Murdoch’s. The idea that we must have an objective, impersonal story to tell about moral actions – that everything “knowable” is everything that is not “subjective” – requires that we take a detached (objective) perspective. Our actual life in language is, one might say, sacrificed in favor of “objectivity”. The only form of reflection that is, as it were, “kosher” today, is aesthetical reflection. And if our lives are at odds with the “results” we come up with, there’s no limit to how many bullets we are prepared to bite. At times, I almost feel as if the ideal that flourishes in some philosophy departments today is that the more repugnant the conclusion is the better. For the more repugnant it is, the more obvious is it that I, the

philosopher, have been objective. (“I have even sacrificed myself!”) That life and philosophy no longer is in contact does not seem to matter especially much.

The fact that this clash between real life and philosophy is not recognized as illustrating that something has gone seriously wrong, is not (primarily) meant to be an accusation directed towards contemporary moral philosophers. Remember, “[p]hilosophy, like newspapers, is both the guide and the mirror of its age.” And given that we live in an age which worships science and not God, numbers rather than metaphysics (in the widest sense of the term), the objective over the subjective – it is no surprise that the philosophers’ reflections mirrors just that. We discuss what we see and we think of ourselves in terms of what we have become and what we wish to be. (In a near to tautological turn of phrase: We don’t speak dead languages.)

As we have accepted the picture of man as being a rational agent, it follows also that moral philosophy should focus more on actions and the truth and falsity of singular propositions, rather than, say, a humans moral vision of herself and her time, and the larger stories we tell about ourselves and the present-day culture. This too, is a consequence of limiting philosophical reflection to aesthetic categories (still speaking Kierkegaardian). The fact that this is not all there is to morality when it comes to our real relations to others seems to have fallen out of the picture as a real concern.

Murdoch, however, wants to stress that fact. She sees it as a true fact that:

When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think is funny: in short the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation.11

This situation, as I understand it, is this: We have created a picture of the human according to which she is (or at least can be, if she is not disturbed or corrupted) smart, cold and rational, a free agent, in control of her desires, responsible for her actions (but not to God). This is what has become the guiding picture of the good man. And so we strive to become that human. The result is disastrous. For when we focus on the facts of the human life that Murdoch emphasizes, it becomes clear that the human today fails to live up to the more restricted, rational, picture on, basically, all accounts. The funny thing is that we tend to cling on to this rational human agent nevertheless when we try to understand ourselves. (Who does not want to be rational?) But when Murdoch’s reminders confronts us, it becomes clear that there is a real conflict here – a confusion of categories if you wish – between that picture of the human and the real human.12

The fact of the real human, her existence, which has been theorized away, is something, I take it, nobody wants to deny. Indeed, the fact that these very real things have been forgotten or neglected might sound strange. For when we remind ourselves of them, we know immediately that they have been there all along. That is, I don’t think that many philosophers today would reject Murdoch’s view that the human moral life actually is wider, more complicated and not as cold and calculated as certain moral theories suggests, but I do think that many philosophers would deny that (wider) human – with all

---

10 Iris Murdoch, “Against Dryness”, p. 287.


12 As we will see, this discrepancy between the real and the picture is something that Murdoch thinks that literature must always be preoccupied with.
her faults and imperfections – a central place in philosophy. \(^\text{13}\) That the human is not the cold rational being that the larger story tells us that we are and should be, can also be seen as a reason to keep struggling.

The question of whether or not there is a conflict between the human and the picture of the human is thus not the sole concern here. The issue is also, and more importantly, whether or not the human will survive (meaning, whether or not the human actually will become nothing more than that flimsy and shallow being that Murdoch displays). I think that it is possible to see that the idea of the human as a rational agent, whose moral life consists of choosing between acts and goods that are publicly open to view, actually come frighteningly natural to us today. We can see how this liberal/utilitarian/behaviouristic/existentialistic picture of human morality is everywhere present. In fact, one might even say that it permeates the very idea of research today. Perhaps we can now say that even the idea of research is tormented by a conceptual confusion?

It is at least clear to me that my attempts to employ that word seem to differ a great deal from today’s (economically) goal-oriented and politicized sense of “researcher”. For

\(^{\text{13}}\) Here, it should be noted that moral philosophy has undergone a lot of changes since Murdoch wrote, that there are, for example, many theories today that stress the importance of the particular, of emotions, of literature and art, of virtue, of vision even, and that relies less heavily upon principles for moral action. However, as Cora Diamond notes “It is no longer fashionable to believe that moral philosophy must be ‘ethically neutral’. But the underlying ideas have not shifted: There is still, in the practice of moral philosophy, the belief that there is a single basic structure of moral discourse or of moral thinking. There is, for example, nothing out-of-date in a moral philosopher taking it that moral thought, if it is to lead to action, must involve the application of some moral principle—otherwise, our thought supposedly cannot logically not bear on action.” Cora Diamond, “We are Perpetually Moralists”, in Antonaccio and Schweiker (eds.), Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 86n.12. Furthermore, I nevertheless think that although moral philosophy has changed a great deal – becoming less remote from the Murdochian moral world – much moral philosophy still cling on to the picture of the human that Murdoch criticizes. And, if my argumentation in this essay holds, then it is also true that the deeper level of Murdoch’s worries that come together with a specific way of using language, a specific way of looking at language, and a state of culture in large, remains largely untouched so long as language and culture at large keep developing along the lines that Murdoch criticizes.

a long period of time, ‘research’ involved the idea of “not knowing” and research was thus a concept that always involved, as a necessary part, a moment of risk. That is, research was something one engaged in did when one did not know what was going to happen, or if one did not know where a line of thinking would take us. However, if one looks at what is demanded by a researcher today, “not knowing how to go on” is not really an option. You must be able to tell on beforehand where your research is going, what the expected outcome is, and why it is to the benefit to the market, your government (a word that, strikingly, has come to replace that of a nation) or, in some cases, merely your research community – but never to “us” or to “human kind”; because to talk of the good of human kind has become a mere gesture.

We live in a time where the word “utility” has been given a certain sense, and there are no researchers who do not want to be useful. We might say that the sense of usefulness we are controlled by now also is a utilitarian, economized and politicized notion. So deep into the segments of the researchers’ form of life has this understanding of utility penetrated, that the researchers themselves do not know of any other meaning. If my research is to be of any good, it has to be good for something else, something particular, and clearly defined.

But if we adopt this sense of “utility” and try to lead a researching life through the old idea of research as a state of not knowing, things begin to fall apart. We find ourselves engaged in an activity which we enjoy, think of as being important, which has a history we admire, but we find ourselves unable to describe, even to ourselves, what the good of our labors are. Of course, no one spends hours and hours over hundreds of boring books for fun. There is a point to it, but that point seems to be hard to formulate in terms
of the “utilitarianized” idea of “useful”. And so we have meetings, workshops and seminars, try to establish a position in a “network” in which we try to come up with new and exiting ways to be “useful”. That is, the utilitarian-economic-political understanding of “useful” is the only “legitimate” understanding today, and so it becomes hard to square our own practice as researchers with the simple desire to be useful in the world. Communication has been broken, confusion taken its place.

The result is a slow suicide. The harder we try to be useful in the world, the harder we find it to show that our practice at the universities could be of some genuine good (if by good, we mean good for something particular: as having direct and measurable consequences for, say, a company or a government). If this difficulty is not acknowledged, all research that does not go hand in hand with the contemporary goal-oriented utility-school will become mere ornamental relics.

The cure then? One needs to make clear that this conceptual confusion exists, that the confusion and the illusion of sense is real. And this is no simple matter, for it involves taking a researcher to a place where he or she recognizes that “I, a researcher, do not know what is meant with the word ‘research’ anymore”. For as long as two conflicting ideas of research are competing, backing themselves up with unanalyzed ideas of utility, chances are that researchers will try to become useful in the new sense, even though they know that their scientific practice cannot in practice be squared with that ideal. In desperation not to become ornamental, we’ll do nothing but ornamental work.

The picture of the human, and its related idea of what counts as real and useful knowledge that underlies it, is indeed a very powerful picture. Our thinking today is very often conducted in economic, politicized, liberal and utilitarian terms. It has become part of our self-understanding. This type of forgetfulness is hard, very hard, to make clear.

Just take a sentence such as “More of the good is better.” It seems so bleeding true to us that not many would feel inclined to question it at all. It has a tautological sound to it, carrying a slight resemblance with a sentence such as “the good is not bad”. ‘Good’ is, as it were, naturally linked to ‘better’.

With the recourses developed above, one can now begin to see that what this seemingly obvious statement actually conveys is an example of a conceptual confusion. Perhaps we might say that the confusion resides in a conflation between the subjective and the objective, granted that my reader is willing to call the mathematical ‘objective’ – which also means, of course, that we call the mathematical a form of ‘aesthetic reflection’. I mean, it is all too easy to think that “more of the good” can be understood as “mere adding”. One dollar is better than none, two is better than one, three hundred is… If one scoop of ice cream is Good, then two scoops is even better; three scoops… This thought is convincing only insofar as we take a disinterested (aesthetic) attitude towards the object. I, as subject qua subject, am not part of the equation. Suppose, for example that I am full… How I relate to an object is thus, of importance here. Even though it is natural to make connections between that which is good and that which is better, it is not

---

14 Cf. Climacus’s wonderful remark: “For example, inwardness in erotic love does not mean to get married seven times to Danish girls, and then go to the French, the Italian, etc., but to love one and the same and yet be continually rewarded in the same erotic love, so that it continually flowers anew in mood and exuberance – which, when applied to communication, is the inexhaustible renewal and fertility of expression. Inwardness cannot be communicated directly, because expressing it is externally (oriented outwardly, not inwardly), and expressing inwardness directly is no proof at all that it is there (the direct outpouring of feeling is no proof at all that one has it, but the tension of the contrastive form is the dynamometer of inwardness), and the reception intrinsic to inwardness is not a direct reproduction of what was communicated, since that is an echo.” Johannes Climacus, Concluding Unscientific PostScript, pp. 259ff.
necessarily equally natural to link ‘good’ with ‘more’ which we have a tendency to do today.

One might link this observation to Cavell’s distinction between natural, biological, or vertical agreement in contrast to conventional, ethnological or horizontal agreement. Discussing Wittgenstein’s claim that agreement in language is “not an agreement in opinions but in form of life”, Cavell remarks that:

“A conventional sense of form of life will support a conventionalized, or contractual, sense of agreement. But there is a sense of form of life that contests this. Call the former the ethnological sense, or horizontal sense. Contesting that there is a biological or vertical sense. Here what is at issue are not alone differences between promising and fully intending, or between coronations and inaugurations, or between barter and a credit system, or between transferring your money or sword from one hand to another and giving your money or sword into the hands of another; these are differences within the same plane, the horizon, of the social, of human society. The biological or vertical sense of form of life recalls differences between the human and so-called ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ forms of life, between, say, poking at your food, perhaps with a fork, and pawing at it, or pecking at it. The link I see between Cavell’s analysis of different ways to spell out the relevant sense of “form of life” and my discussion of the good, is that I see it as natural, “biological” if you wish, to say that the good is related to that which is better, and that the link between the good and ‘more’ is, as it were, merely conventional. My worry is thus that we have a tendency today to forget the natural and biological sense, and place all our emphasis on the conventional.

Murdoch talks a lot about a lost sense of the importance of one’s “inner life”. Kierkegaard talked a lot about a lost sense of “inwardness”. Wittgenstein repeatedly emphasized that the personal relation to one’s thinking is crucial, that truthfulness is a prerequisite for truth. Again, there is a striking similarity here. Cultural criticism, philosophy of language and self-criticism interconnect. As we have seen, for Murdoch this lost sense of the human inner life has resulted in a “general loss of concepts”. It is thus not merely the word “human” which has changed. An aspect of Murdoch’s thinking that this little ice cream example highlights is the fact that we have begun to think of “the Good” in purely objective terms as well. What is good is no longer good for a particular person in the sense of her growth and development. What counts as good today is a thing or an action. (That is, ‘good’ can always be translated into other wordings such as “fills my need for nicotine”; “stimulates economic growth”, “stops my hunger”; “makes her happy”, etc. etc.) Good has become synonymous with “good for something particular” and that particular must be publicly observable and measurable. One might say that in the eagerness to make everything measurable, intersubjectively available, we forgot about the true weight and content of our words. Philosopher’s have actively thereby decided (and it is a weird form if decision, I know) to say that it does not really matter who says what under what circumstance. Thought and scholarship can today – so it is sometimes argued anyway – be weighed and measured in truly numerical terms. (The situation is almost as ridiculous as if a scholar of sorts had written an essay and his colleagues and students complained that it was too long, that there would not be enough time to read it all, to

---

16 Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, pp. 41f.
17 See e.g. “The Idea of Perfection”.
18 A good example is the pseudonymous *Concluding Unscientific Postscript.*
19 For example: “You cannot write anything about yourself that is more truthful than you yourself are” (Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p.33); and: “If anyone is unwilling to descend into himself … he will remain superficial in his writing.” Wittgenstein quoted in Rush Rhees, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections* (XXXXX), p. 193. See also James Conant, “Putting Two and Two Together”, p. 281.
which the scholar replied: “Don’t worry! It’s double spaced, so you’re already half way through.”

Against this focus on action and choice, Murdoch wants to reawaken a sense of a human’s moral vision.

[If we attend to more complex regions which lie outside ‘actions’ and ‘choices’ we see moral differences as differences of understanding (…), more or less extensive and important, which may show openly or privately as differences of story or metaphor or as differences of moral vocabulary betokening different ranges and ramifications of moral concept. Here communication of a new moral concept cannot necessarily be achieved by specification of factual criteria open to any observer (‘Approve of this area!’) but may involve the communication of a completely new, possibly far-reaching and coherent vision; and it is certainly true that we cannot always understand other peoples moral concepts.]

Vision over Choice

What is this primacy of vision over choice? Let me take an example involving a story about a situation which I suspect many contemporary moral philosophers recognize. If one starts to think “professionally” about morality and ethics today, it is almost inevitable that a modern moral philosopher sooner or later will confront you with an example that runs something like this:

“You are driving your car, in a high speed. Suddenly, you find yourself confronted with a terrible dilemma. The road is parting, and to your left you see one man, evidently blind since he is using a stick. To your right you see a crowd of approximately four persons. What do you do?”

My immediate response – and I suspect that I am not alone in thinking along these lines – is: “Hit the breaks!” Now, the philosopher objects, of course, and says: “No, some evildoer has tampered with your breaks, so you have none. What do you do? Do you aim for the road with one person on, or the one with four? It’s a straightforward question. Which is better?” I answer, of course: “Neither! I’ll aim for a ditch, or a field, or whatever. I run the car off the road if I have to.” Our moral philosopher sighs and adds: “No, you can’t. There are walls surrounding the road, on both sides – even on the sides of the roads that you have not yet entered. So you must take one of the two roads! Do you aim for the road with one person on, or the one with four? You have to choose!” At this point I am, honestly, likely to turn my back on the philosopher. For, in my view, and I believe I share that view with Murdoch and many others, we are no longer discussing morals at all, but science fiction. Science fiction might have its merits, but when it is used to distort all we know about what being human is, I find it far from helpful. And, perhaps more important, this emphasis on action and choice is precisely the view of moral philosophy that Murdoch thinks to be entirely confused.

23 I heard this grammatical joke in a dormant state of mind, couching on a Sunday before the TV. My memory vaguely tells me that this joke should be attributed to the character Betty Suarez in the TV show Ugly Betty.

22 Iris Murdoch, “Vision and Choice in Morality”, p. 82.

23 I know that this way of formulating the example, and the discussion I imagine myself having with the modern moral philosopher, is a bit bantering. But I hope that the tone will be excused, since its bantering tone is part of its point.

24 This is not the place for a critical scrutiny of the variety of moral theories that build strength from examples such as this one. But it might be said, preliminary, that such moral theories often depend on, at least, two highly problematical philosophical theses, which Murdoch has criticized heavily. One is about the nature of the human, the other about the nature of language. Thus, it is not merely that fact that this type of examples are “weird”, that they are remote from our everyday lives that is the problem here. For there are philosophical positions that underlie and enable these examples, assumptions that one must (silently) accept if these examples are to have any effect on moral reasoning. Examples of such presuppositions are the view of language according to which sentences are to be seen as meaningful in themselves, the view of man as wholly rational and calculating, and the view of morality as something that can be, as it were, stripped off from the human’s picture of herself – of where she comes from, where she thinks she wants to go and how a given act is to be thought of in relation to that vision. (Think for example about the importance of words such as fear, shame, love, anger, pride…)}
The difference between my fictional modern moral philosopher who tried to make me run over people in my imagination on the one side, and Murdoch and me on the other.
is, one might say, a difference in moral vision. These differences show themselves not necessarily in how we would reason and judge in specific circumstances or in passing this or that “judgment” about this or that proposition, but in what we count as a moral thing to say, what we think we should focus our attention on in thinking about morality; for example, we differ in our view of the point of thinking about moral dilemmas such as this one.

And, please, do notice that this story about a conversation between me and the little quasi-utilitarian straw man philosopher that I have here – I admit – ridiculed, does not constitute an argument against, say, utilitarianism. The example is here employed to show that while some people feel amused with recognition and laugh at it, others are seriously offended since they do feel ridiculed, and rightly so. This is one way differences of moral vision manifest themselves. The fact that varieties of consequentially oriented theories of human action lend themselves to this kind of derision says something about this kind of theories. The fact these kinds of mockeries are sometimes met with a theorist’s wounded scorn says something about the fact that it is mockery. These two facts together, the gulf between the philosopher laughing and the philosopher scorned, point out differences in vision.

So the question is now: How do we try to go about in the attempt to communicate with each other; how can these differences in moral vision be reconciled (if they can)? Can one convince another human being that their entire moral vision is faulty? Is that even a sensible question?) Is there a point of convergence for the human ridiculed and the human laughing? Can such an issue be settled “objectively”?

The true, but really difficult answer is, I fear: “No, not easily, not by any normal straightforward philosophical argumentation anyway.” This is also Murdoch’s view.

If (…) we hold that a man’s morality is not only his choices but his vision, then this may be deep, ramified, hard to change and not easily open to argument. It is also less realistic to say that it is itself something which we chose; and then it may seem that our conception of moral freedom is in danger. Here it may be said that those who think that freedom is absolute in the ‘withdraw and reflect’ sense confuse the wish with the fact – and that there is no need to equate the freedom needed to ensure morality with a complete independence of deep conceptual attitudes. It may be argued that we ought always to assume that perfect communication and disinterested reflection about facts can precede moral judgment and it is true that such an attitude may often be desirable (…) Finally, the notion that moral differences are conceptual (in the sense of being differences of vision) and must be studied as such is unpopular in so far as it makes impossible the reduction of ethics to logic, since it suggest that morality must, to some extent at any rate, be studied historically. This does not of course imply abandoning the linguistic method, it rather implies taking it seriously.25

Murdoch means that our moral lives consist of much more than making choices between competing propositions and actions – even though we do that too. And this is a point were Murdoch’s view of the human and her view of language interconnects. One might say that Murdoch had learned the lesson that a word only has sense in the stream of life. “It is important to remember that language itself is a moral medium, almost all uses of language convey value. This is one reason why we are almost always morally active. Life is soaked in the moral, literature is soaked in the moral.”26

---

25 Murdoch, “Vision and Choice in Morality”, p. 84.
26 Ibid., pp. 27f. When Murdoch is saying, for example, that “almost all uses of language convey value”, she is often seen as advocating a philosophical position that rejects the existence of the fact/value distinction altogether. It is certainly true that this is a very complicated issue, and it is also certain that Murdoch denies a specific realm where questions of value never arise. So, to that extent, it is true to say that Murdoch denies the fact/value distinction. But, as Cora Diamond has strikingly remarked, if indeed moral issues are always in play, then there is a difference between questions of value and questions of facts, because factual matters are not ubiquitously present. One might say that though we are perpetually moralists, we are not perpetually botanists, mathematicians, historians, etc. In these and similar matters, there are, Diamond claims, “distinct practices of arriving at and justifying factual judgments”, but if value is ubiquitous then there is no single subject matter, a specific branch to which it belongs. See Diamond,
But if the form of life in question differs, well, chances are that the sentences we employ in trying to make our points fails to mean what we want them to mean – that is, we mean what we say, but we fail to convey that. "Any attitude", Murdoch remarks, "may be made to look absurd if its conceptual background is removed." In short, if our moral language is not merely a "set of moral concepts" but hang together with language in its entirety, which in turn then is inseparable from how we lead our lives in large, then taking the linguistic method seriously must include taking these facts seriously too. And it also means that a shift of one's moral vocabulary is more or less synonymous with a change of one self. "[A] moral concept seems less like a movable ring laid down to cover a certain area of fact, and more like a total difference of Gestalt. We differ not only because we select different objects out of the same world but because we see different worlds."

Another example: picture a boy brought up in a home of two religions – his mother Catholic, his dad Jewish. For various reasons he was not circumcised as a child. However, as an adult he starts having long discussions about morality and religion with his Jewish grandmother. This fact warms the grandmother's heart. And after a while, she starts talking about the importance of being circumcised. So he starts thinking about whether or not he should have a circumcision or not. It is possible to describe this man as having a difficult choice to make. ("Should I have a circumcision or not?") But, in my view, what that question is about is not whether he should have that particular incision made or not, but, rather, whether or not he thinks of his present and future self as "Jewish" and in what sense of "Jewish". To put it bluntly, it is merely on the surface that the question concerns the being or non-being of the foreskin. The issue is not a choice between two competing propositions. Furthermore, what is a stake is not some abstract thesis (say, "Judaism is the best religion") that he should affirm or reject, but his entire vision of himself and his future. He needs to ponder what it means for him to call himself "Jewish". "Do I belong here?"; "Is this a decree that is defining for being Jewish?" Of course, that (last) question is heavily debated among Rabbi’s, and it might be possible to cash out in terms of competing propositions, but for our man in the example it concerns his entire being, belonging, becoming. His question is "What does ‘being Jewish’ mean for me?" and if you remove him, it is no longer the same question.

Many philosophers like to think that we need to abstract from the real world situations and contexts, and reach to what they like to think of as a “concrete thesis”, that is applicable to any and all. This is a view that I, and Murdoch and many others, think is wrongheaded. What you get if you subtract situations, contexts and individuals is not something concrete that is valid for any and all, but something very abstract that – although it might, in a weird sense, be applicable to any and all – is of no real moral importance to anyone.

Against this picture of the good as a particular thing or action, Murdoch wants to re-awaken a concept of good as a struggle. In particular, one might say that the good is the struggle to become truthful to oneself, to the world, and to others. In that respect, the good – here obviously linked to the Platonic notion or ‘eros’ – is a struggle for perfection.

---

“We are Perpetually Moralists”, pp. 104-109. The quotation above is from p. 106. See also Stephen Mulhall, “Misplacing Freedom, Displacing the Imagination: Cavell and Murdoch on the Fact/Value Distinction”, in Anthony O’Hear (ed.), Philosophy, the Good, the True and the Beautiful, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement: 47 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).


28 Ibid., p. 82.
[We] wish to say that the impulse towards goodness should stir the whole person. This demand does not isolate goodness in the way in which ‘good’ is isolated in an existentialist scheme, where it is merely an empty box into which chosen items are put. If ‘free choice’ alone confers value, then all that is needed is a pointing finger; no place for cognitive struggle involving specialised informative moral concepts.29

Making Pictures (Perfectionism and Vision)

The idea of perfection includes the fact that we all strive to accomplish something, be someone, become better, true to oneself, or, in a slightly more pretentious wording: become who you are. As Murdoch says: “The idea of perfection haunts all our activity, and we are well aware of how we try to blot it out.”30 About this formulation, Stephen Mulhall has aptly remarked:

On the one hand, ‘the idea of perfection haunts all our activity’: every time we cleave to a new picture of reality, we become at once certain that it cannot be the ultimate reality, and so cannot be our stopping-place. As finite creatures, we can never lose the sense that our moral perception is capable of further refinement; so the purification of our consciousness can never attain perfection, but neither can it shrug off its demands.31

Murdoch’s version of perfectionism includes, at least, two central ideas: First, that the search for truth must always be guided by truthfulness, no matter what kind of truth we are seeking to uncover. (“Truthful imaging requires courage and humility. Truthfulness is aware of the obligation not to cause distress.”32) Secondly, it also means that one’s own personal positioning in a moral life with words, will always be on the move – never finished. The struggle for perfection is a constant struggle. Truth as truthfulness “is a matter of deepening the concepts, in question through a relation to each other. There is a continuous and spontaneous interplay. ‘Becoming better’ is a process involving exercise and refinement of moral vocabulary and sensitivity.”33

From the perspective of moral perfectionism, the removal of self- afflicted confusions is central to honest thinking and true moral progression. In order to highlight that thought, I would like to call attention to a perfectionist moment that takes place in George Cukor’s classic movie The Philadelphia Story (1939). The story in short is a story about a woman, Tracy Lord (played by Katherine Hepburn), who is just about to marry George Kittridge (played by John Howard). However, the movie opens two years before the wedding with the break-up between Tracy and her former husband C. K. Dexter Haven (played by Cary Grant). Dexter is in place at the scene of the marriage between Kittridge and his former wife, arriving a couple of days before the wedding. He “rode in on a filthy blackmail”. That is, he is trying to protect his (former) family who are threatened by Spy Magazine whose editor in chief wants to publish a story about Tracy’s dad having an affair with a much younger dancer. In order to prevent that story from being published, Dexter has agreed to get a reporter/writer (James Stewart) and a photographer (played by Ruth Hussey) from Spy Magazine to attend the wedding, to write an inside-story about this big celebrity wedding.

As the story unfolds, it becomes evident that Tracy has three men around her – her husband to be George, her former husband Dexter, and the writer/journalist Mike – who are all interested in her. She seems to be forced to make a very difficult choice.34

30 Ibid., p. 428.
33 Ibid.
34 For the reader who has not seen the film, and desires a fuller description of its main story, see Chapter 2 of Stanley Cavell’s, Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004).
However, some forty minutes or so into the film, all three men plus her father get involved with her, one after the other, in discussions concerning how they perceive Tracy. Strikingly, they all provide similar pictures. She is described as a goddess, a statue, someone (or something?) to be worshiped. But these very similar descriptions of her character still vary. Not in (linguistic) content, but in tone of voice, in value connotations. One might say that Tracy receives (at least) three mirrors in which she is reflected. She is now confronted with the question of whether or not the ideal she is on the verge of perfecting is a true picture of who she really wants to be(-come).

There are many reasons why a short detour to the world of the movie might be instructive. Here I want to focus on two details. One is the perfectionist moment. The other is the nature of what is being said in the communications.

The dialogues that Tracy Lord participates in, work as an illustration of the effect and power of a mirror. She discovers something about herself which she, at some level, already knew. Otherwise she would have deemed the picture of her false, and she could have rebuked their charges as irrelevant and merely mean. But her tears and her anger tell us she does identify with these pictures of her. The three or so mirroring encounters that she faces, employs almost exactly the same words. She is described as a goddess, a statue – someone to be worshiped. Dexter’s words have the sound of an accusation – and Tracy takes it to be so at first, and responds with anger. But Dexter denies that he has any sort of contempt for her. “Not of you Red. Never of You.” Nevertheless, it is clear that there is a certain, peculiar, form of disdain in the tone of his voice. But he has no contempt for her person (her whole being). What invests Dexter’s words with the sound of an accusation is that she is not true to herself. As Cavell remarks, “He is not accusing her of some misdeed (as lying, stealing, treachery of some kind) but rather describing her as being unworthy of herself, of what she could be.”

Her husband to be, George, also describes her as some kind of Goddess. As a response of sorts, she bursts out that she wants “to be useful in the world” – which I see as a true and genuine longing of hers, this is who and what she really wants to become. George responds with a very degrading laughter. “Useful! You!” He wants to build her an Ivory Tower…

Both Dexter and George mirror her as a Goddess, using almost the same phrases. One employs these words to tell her that she is no longer true to her self, or at least, that she has become an entirely different person. She is, as Dexter says, far from being “a first class woman, or a first class human being”. George, on the other hand employs her Godlike appearance only in praise. He adores (but perhaps not love) her for her “ability” to stand above everything worldly. That she could be useful in the world is a joke to him. The third time she is confronted with a reflection of herself is the following discussion she has with her father. In this discussion, she starts placing the words of the first two mirrors in his mouth – and they fit. Her life as she leads it now – a life which builds on "marrying George" – is a life that is heading in the direction of perfecting the image of her as a goddess, a statue, something without use and purpose, best placed in an ivory tower. This is the road which she finds herself to be traveling.

---

[53] As Cavell rightly remarks, “Dexter is here on dangerous moral ground. (…) If we are to take Dexter seriously, he cannot mean that being first class means you deserve to command a greater share of the world’s goods than others do. (…) We would like to take Dexter to mean by ‘a first class human being’ something like being one who makes serious moral demands upon her/himself. (…) What counts as serious demands upon oneself, is what perfectionism concerns itself with, after rational calculations have been made and standing obligations have been assessed and met, or found unworthy.” (Cavell, Cities of Words, pp. 46f.)
As I have said, Tracy is pictured, mirrored, in almost identical wordings. The difference is in the how. Where two of them have the tone or shade of something like disappointment, Kittridge’s has the shade and tone of worship. And we might say that it is up to her, Tracy, to put two and two together. Thus, the mirror shows no hidden secret. They show nothing that cannot be said. (In fact, they say it.) And they present a true picture of reality: this is how she looks. (As Kittridge say’s “It’s how everyone sees you!”) The question is, one might say, in how she and the men who care for her relate to this image.

This illustrates well how the idea of a mirroring philosophy contains the idea of a philosophy must deal with the complexities of language and life. That, for example, words are deeds, that how we say something matters, and where, and why, in what tone of voice even – and how the fact that we sometimes fail to carry the weight of our words can make all the difference.

Here, the medium of the film – the fact that we learn this by watching a movie rather than by reading arguments and theses – needs to be taken into account. The truth of the matter requires, one might say, that we know a great deal about Tracy Lord, and that we know that the men mirroring her know her very well. The adequacy of the mirrors hangs on this fact. Not anyone could have told Tracy these facts. Her difficulty is, in a sense, unique or particular. They wouldn’t have been facts in the same sense if a less well known man would have simply informed her that she is such and such a woman. In such a case, the same sentences would not have had the same meaning. This is one reason why philosophy might do well in going to the movies and read literature carefully, not just to assemble well written and amusing examples to bring into philosophy books in order to illustrate philosophical theses. If the philosophical point lies in the artwork as a whole, then the watching of the film or the reading of the book are philosophical activities in their own right.  

The story of Tracy Lord becoming who she is, also shows that the single action – say, marry or not marry – was not never the central issue. What mattered was Tracy’s vision of herself. The “decisions” followed more or less naturally after that. Vision over choice. “Man make pictures of himself, and then come to resemble these pictures” says Murdoch. I see Tracy’s moral pilgrimage as acknowledgment of the fact that she had come to resemble a picture that she did not “want” to resemble. It was a true picture of the person she was at that moment, but that true picture were at odds with the idea she had, or at least thought she had, of herself.

I would also like to add a few further remarks on the context of discovery here. In a certain sense, it is correct to say that Tracy was living an illusion. She was wrong about herself. Her self-understanding stood, one might say, in conflict with her living; her idea of love as including, for example, being seen for who you really are, stood in conflict with marrying her husband to be. Now, how does one remove someone from such an illusion? The first time she hears that she has become such and such a woman, she responds with anger. But what makes her see the truth about herself comes not from

---

37 Yada yada yada
36 I hesitate in saying that Tracy did not want to resemble that picture, since I think that these kinds of “choices” are not really choices in an ordinary straightforward sense. I will return to this below.
39 At this juncture, recall Kierkegaard’s words: “By direct attack he only strengthens a person in the illusion and also infuriates him. Generally speaking, there is nothing that requires as gentle a treatment as the removal of an illusion. If one in any way causes the one ensnared to be antagonized, then all is lost. And this one does by direct attack, which in addition also contains the presumptuousness of demanding that another person confess to one or face-to-face with one make the confession that actually is most beneficial when the person concerned makes it to himself secretly. The latter is achieved by the indirect method (…).” Kierkegaard, The Point of View for My Work as an Author, p. 459.
some new astonishing information that has hitherto been hidden. The illusion is, as it were, indirectly removed. Inside the illusion the words she saw in the mirrors could not be squared with her picture of herself. (As long as she thought that she was on the right track in becoming who she really is, it was in a sense false to say that she was becoming a goddess, a statue.)

Murdoch clearly holds that the weight and import of our moral vocabulary cannot be separated from the way we lead our lives in whole, a view which she shares with Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. Furthermore, they all thought that conceptual confusions have the particular form where the person trying to lead her words, command them, fails to do so. This illusion of sense, they all thought, can best – and at times perhaps only – be dissolved by a mirroring strategy. The confused must recognize his or her own confusions as confusions, for as long as someone is in the illusion of sense, words seem (obviously, hence the “illusion”) to make perfect sense. I have also stressed that this form of illusion often arise because the life we try to lead with the aid of this or that thought, this or that moral vocabulary, are in some sort of conflict with one another.

This encounter of a perfectionist moment in The Philadelphia Story, also point to an often neglected aspect of perfectionism – at least in the form we find it in Murdoch and Cavell. Perfectionism, as a moral theory of sorts, is in an important sense not an alternative to the most common varieties of philosophical moral theories. Cavell summarizes this point thus:

The conversations in, for example, re-marriage comedy, are cases in which one soul is examining another, cases of moral encounter. These people are rebuking one another, questioning one another about how they live, specifically about how they live together. (…) The principal moral theories in professional philosophical pedagogy are Utilitarianism and Kantianism, and neither illuminates what draws these pairs to commit themselves to each other and to confront each other as they do. Most generally, the pair at the centre of a remarriage comedy are not asking themselves whether the consequences of their marrying are likely to be good measured by utilitarian standards of greater promise of pleasure over pain. That seems more pertinent to whether a pair might choose to spend a weekend together or buy a new car. Or can we elicit a Kantian principle that explains why it is we marry? Do we wish to attest that all who can marry should marry? (…) What our pair are talking about is who they want to be and what they want to be together and what kind of world they want to live in, in short whether they are being true to themselves in seeking each other out. But such questions are exactly what moral perfectionism asks us to ask of ourselves. (…) In sum, since the nature of the conversation is fundamental to the films of remarriage, and since perfectionism illuminates these conversations more fully and precisely than any other moral theory, perfectionist writing articulates these films more fully and precisely than any other moral theory.

On this score, it is important to keep in mind that Murdoch’s vision of moral perfectionism contains no claims at all about what a “perfected” human would be. Indeed, as in the case of Cavell, “perfectionism (…) specifically sets itself against any idea of ultimate perfection.” And in relation to this, one must also not forget that

---

40 As Cavell notes: “[T]he aim of moral reasoning in perfectionism [is] not to assess pluses and minuses of advantage, nor to assess whether the act is recommendable universally (…). Perfectionism concentrates on this moment. First, it recognizes difficulties in moral life that arise not from an ignorance of your duties, whether your inability to act on your self-confessed longing to be useful in the world is based on anything more than fear of your vanity on wanting to be perfect, intact, without the need of human company.” (Cavell, Cities of Words, p. 42.)

41 This relates directly to the example of the modern moral philosopher and the parting road that I employed earlier on, where I wanted to show that differences of vision show themselves not primarily in the discussion of examples, arguments and theses, but surface at an earlier point at which our point of focus and attention are displayed – in for example the choice of examples. Cavell is on the same track when he says that “Utilitarianism proposes a means of calculate the good of an action. Kantianism proposes a principle of judgment to determine the rightness of an action. (…) Perfectionism is the province not of those who oppose justice or benevolent calculation, but of those who feel left out of their sway, who feel indeed that most people have been left, or leave themselves out, of their sway.” Cavell, Cities of Words, pp. 24f.

42 Stanley Cavell, “Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Andrew Klevan” in Film as Philosophy: Essays on Cinema After Wittgenstein After Cavell, red. Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough (Palgrave Macmillan: 2005), pp. 201f. Notice also that the relation between film and philosophy is the reverse in comparison to how philosophers most often turn to film or literature to gain clarity. Cavell does not turn to the world of the movie in order to illustrate or exemplify a specific philosophical point. Rather, he turns to philosophy from film because the film presents an important fact of human moral life that seems to be impossible to deal with by means of the philosophical recourses at his disposal.

43 Cavell, Cities of Words, p. 3.
Murdoch has no positive characterizations of what “the Good” is – only negative one’s.44 There is not a specifiable goal to strive for that is knowable on beforehand. Rather, becoming who you are, is in Murdoch’s (and Cavell’s, and Kierkegaard’s and probably also in Wittgenstein’s) view a constant struggle. This struggle cannot be conducted solely in an “outward” way be means of objective, aesthetic, reflection. Changing one’s vision, as part of the struggle for perfection, is, Murdoch argues, a coming to see. It requires a specific type of clarity concerning one’s own inner life.

Murdoch’s well known example of a mother in law, M, and her view of her daughter in law, D, is meant to illustrate that. For starters, I would like to highlight the fact that Murdoch enters that example through an observation that bears a striking resemblance with Kierkegaard’s (and Wittgenstein’s) thinking, which directly links the question of the achievement of clarity of one’s inner life required by the perfectionist struggle, to the question of sense and weight of words as being intimately intertwined with the way one leads one’s life as a whole. So I follow Murdoch’s lead and introduce that example via its Kierkegaardian starting-point:

It can be argued that I make a promise by uttering the words ‘I promise’: a performative utterance. But do I, in a religious context, repent by simply uttering the words ‘I repent’, am I ‘heartily sorry’ simply by saying in an appropriate situation that I am heartily sorry? Is this so even if I then amend my life?45

This formulation helps to bring into view the fact that the issue of words being intimately intertwined with the way one leads one’s life as a whole, is not merely a question of saying the right things in the right circumstances, or of doing what one says one is, or should be, doing. The intimacy of this intertwining must be understood in terms of inwardness (or some related wording).

The example of M and D displays the mother in law (M) and her struggle to see D. At first, she is certain that her son has married beneath him. At the outset, M thinks that “D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile.”46 As the example develops, we find M reflecting seriously about D in her absence. Murdoch even imagines D to have passed away to make sure that we get the point that such reflection can be called for, and conducted, without the other’s presence. You can change your view of the other more or less completely without attending to specific, publicly observable, acts that he or she does, and you can perceive the other clearly, see her for what she is, by reaching clarity about your own personal perception and receptivity. M gives, Murdoch imagines, “careful and just attention to an object which confronts her”47 – the absent D. “D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on.”48

What happens here is, one might say, is that M’s view of D alters completely without D changing even a bit. She sees her in a different light – indeed, I think Murdoch might even say that she sees her for real, for the first time, and so her new vision demands, or calls for, a shift of moral vocabulary. Her two descriptions of D are related – linguistic cousins if you wish – but the moral tone of them ring different sounds. Murdoch now contends that this development of M’s moral vision can hardly be seen as

---

44 Well, we might actually say that she gives something of a positive definition of it when she says, for example, “Good’; ‘Real’; ‘Love’; These concepts are closely connected. And here we retrieve the deep sense of the indefinability of good, which has been given a trivial sense in recent philosophy. Good is indefinable not for the reasons offered by Moore’s successors, but because of the infinite difficulty of the task of apprehending a magnetic but inexhaustible reality.” (Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection”, p. 333.)


46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., p. 313.

48 Ibid.

58 59
an act either. Not in a standard intentional sense anyway. She did not decide to see D correctly, but she has been “morally active” – on her own. “M looks at D, she attends to D, she focuses her attention. M is engaged in an internal struggle.” And, as Murdoch remarks, this is not something that D could have done “in conversation with another”. Of course, this “could not” must not be spelled out superficially, as if the struggle forbids contacts and conversations. Of course, many contacts and many conversations serve to make such struggles more clearly directed and they might situate them more fully in the life of the one struggling. But the struggle itself will always be personal – one’s own, and necessarily one’s own.

What M is doing is not merely to try to see D accurately, but to see her lovingly and justly. And in Murdoch’s view, seeing lovingly is a prerequisite for seeing accurately. Love is not a decision. You can’t decide to love someone. (As if it was possible to say to the other “Love me!” and then she does so, by will.) And if seeing is to be linked with loving, seeing someone or something is not a mere fact of simple observation. Love is not a simple and single act, founded on a neutral decision. Rather, it requires a Kierkegaardian repetition and thus, “M’s activity”, Murdoch states, “is essentially something progressive, something infinitely perfectible. (…) M is engaged in an endless task.”

Thus seeing is linked to loving. And the struggle to see, that is to love, thus becomes an endless journey of progression. And that endless strive is, Murdoch claims, “the idea of perfection”. And, importantly, this struggle for perfection must include, Murdoch argues, a constant openness to the flexibility of language. As we change, so does language (though the words employed might be the same), and vice versa. “Love is knowledge of the individual. M confronted with D has an endless task. Moral tasks are characteristically endless not only because our efforts are imperfect, but also because as we move and as we look our concepts themselves are changing.”

At this juncture, Murdoch localizes a similar source of philosophical confusion that we have encountered in both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard. As we go through life, our concepts change, alter, becomes different – but the words stay the same. We may end up in an illusion of sense, because we think we know what our words mean, since we think we have learned to master them in one context, or in one segment of the individual history, and so we go on to employ it, habitually, taking ourselves to be in command, but lacking the right form of inwardness, thus leaving our language idling.

Murdoch repeatedly argues that we need to train an re-train, learn and re-learn our language – that language is not something fixed that one can appropriate, a lesson one can learn once, and then be done with. The test of language skills is no shorter than life itself. An important point which the M and D example highlights then, is the fact that the mother in law re-educates herself by looking more carefully, attentively. As she comes to see more clearly, her language alters. And this alteration – from one system of metaphors (vulgar, undignified, noisy, tiresomely juvenile) to another (refreshingly simple, spontaneous, gay, delightfully youthful) – changes her perception altogether. And if Murdoch is right, which I think she is, vision precedes choice. But altering ones language is not something which one can choose to do. Sure, one can say to oneself: “I have read

49 Ibid., p. 317.  
50 Ibid.  
51 Ibid.  
52 Ibid., p. 318.  
53 Ibid., p. 321.  
54 Ibid., p. 324.
my Murdoch, I’ll never stop learning language!” But that would amount to having said nothing, for it would be to claim to choose something that is not a choice. The “work of attention” is something that goes on continuously, and it is not something that can be, as it were, “switched off.” But it is something which we can block, deny, reject. As Murdoch says, what is most important is not the explicit moral choices that we make or fail to make, but “[w]hat happens in between such choices”\(^5\). It is in that “in between” that our language is shaped, our vision sharpened, and our attention matured. Choices follow from that, not before. This is the deepest sense, and the most difficult thought, that lies inherent in Murdoch’s claim that “Man is a creature who makes picture of himself, and then come to resemble the picture.”\(^5^7\)

What makes this “in between” so profoundly difficult is not only that it seems to precede and control our moral choices and actions, but that the “in between” itself is out of our control. We do make pictures of ourselves, and we do come (not “choose to”) to resemble these. But that is not to say that the pictures we have come to resemble are good pictures, true pictures – that there is no discrepancy between the picture and the real. “Of course psychic energy flows, and more readily flows, into building up convincingly coherent but false pictures of the world, complete with systematic vocabulary (M seeing D as pert-common-juvenile, etc.) Attention is the effort to counteract such states of illusions.”\(^5^8\)

Creating pictures to guide us, is thus risky business. And that is why I don’t think Murdoch thought that this was a task one should try to engage oneself in. Her main ambition was not to suggest languages for us to speak, but to make us aware – aware for example, of the fact that we have come to resemble a picture of the human that is in conflict with what the human is. In that sense, she is a true follower of Kierkegaard: “Compel a person to an opinion, a conviction, a belief—in all eternity, that I cannot do. But one thing I can do, in one sense the first thing (since it is a condition for the next thing, to accept his view, conviction, belief), in another sense the last thing if he refuses the next: I can compel a person to become aware.”\(^5^9\) We need in one sense more, and in another sense much less, than “a pointing finger.” More, since we need rich picturings, adequate mirrors, of how we do look and how we do think. Less in the sense, that the Murdochichian, Kierkegaardian, Wittgensteinian, moral thinker’s most important point is that pictures are not to be followed either – pictures can become pointing fingers as well. And the mere repetition of a moral statement, of the other’s inwardness (to speak with Kierkegaard) is not an expression, but an echo.

If I am right in my reading of Murdoch here, then the most important task for her is to make us – our culture in large – aware of the fact that we are building our self-understanding on a confused picture of what a human being is. And her largest fear is that we actually will succeed in coming to resemble that picture. Thus, she needs to present a picture for us in which this confusion between the real human and the picture of the human becomes apparent. “Literature must always represent the battle between real

---

\(^{55}\) Ibid., p. 329.

\(^{56}\) Ibid.

\(^{57}\) Murdoch, “Metaphysics and Ethics”, in Existentialist and Mystics, p. 75.


\(^{59}\) Kierkegaard, The Point of View of My Work as an Author, p. 464.

\(^{60}\) I am here referring back to the above quoted passage from Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, p. 323, where Murdoch says: “[W]e wish to say that the impulse towards goodness should stir the whole person. This demand does not isolate goodness in the way in which ‘good’ is isolated in an existentialist scheme, where it is merely an empty box into which chosen items are put. If ‘free choice’ alone confers value, then all that is needed is a pointing finger; no place for cognitive struggle involving specialised informative moral concepts.”
people and images; and what it requires now is a much stronger and more complex conception of the former.\footnote{Murdoch, “Against Dryness”, p. 295.}

We can now see how Murdoch’s vision of perfectionism – that goes hand in hand with her view of the good as good for nothing, lacking a clear object, goal – suits well with this Kierkegaardian/Wittgensteinian thought: Inwardness is what is crucial, but inwardness cannot, in a sense, be communicated. It is not that the truth of inwardness is secret, or hidden, but because your relation to the pictured is the important thing. The repeated inwardness is not inwardness, but an echo. Being able to produce an echo does not make one someone who fully carries the consequences and responsibilities of a moral life. However, it is possible to mirror a man lacking inwardness, living in a certain form of forgetfulness – and I can come to recognize that the man mirrored, who I claim to be confused, looks exactly like me. (And to anticipate what will follow in the next section, in Murdoch’s novels, we hear a lot of echoes of her philosophy, but none, if I’m right, expressed.)

\textit{The Place of Literature}

\textit{Smashing Mirrors: Beginning to Collect}

\textbf{References}


Conant, James, \textit{“On Bruns, on Cavell”}, \textit{Critical Inquiry}, vol. 17, No. 3. (Spring, 1997)