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Iris Murdoch's Moral Attention as an Idea of Philosophical Synthesis

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in European Thought and Culture

by

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December, 2025

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Abstract: In this thesis, I discuss Iris Murdoch's philosophical concept of moral attention, drawing primarily from her essay, "The Idea of Perfection." I suggest that her thinking is a distinctive example of philosophical synthesis that bridges multiple intellectual traditions. Writing against a mid-twentieth century movement that Murdoch characterized as an "existentialist-behaviorist" view that reduced moral life to isolated moments of choice, Murdoch offers an account of moral development that is centered around the patient and continuous work of loving attention. Drawing on Simone Weil's spiritual psychology, Wittgensteinian descriptive method, and Platonic metaphysics, Murdoch proposed that moral progress occurs primarily through inner transformation. This thesis argues that Murdoch has a synthetic intellectual method that integrates different writers commonly considered to belong to both continental and analytic philosophical traditions as well as from literature, religious thought, and psychology. Her work thus serves to demonstrate the value of cross-disciplinary thinking. Furthermore, in a contemporary era characterized by fractured attention and increasing academic specialization, Murdoch's emphasis on sustained, loving attention to reality offers both a compelling moral psychology and a model for the kind of integrative thinking in which humanistic education flourishes. Rather than providing instrumentalist solutions to contemporary educational challenges, Murdoch's work reminds us that moral life begins in how we see, suggesting that the cultivation of attention itself represents a foundational ethical and pedagogical practice.

Iris Murdoch's Moral Attention as an Idea of Philosophical Synthesis

I. Introduction

Anxieties about technology's impact on humanistic education are a significant feature of our time. This is not necessarily a new situation. Different approaches towards and debates about education, particularly education in the discipline sometimes called the "humanities¹," stretch back centuries. There does, however, appear to be something particularly significant about our moment in the year 2025. The humanities, always in search of its *telos*, has found itself in an accelerated state of crisis of meaning and purpose. While it is impossible to make certain predictions about the future of humanities education in our current moment, it is productive to take a close look at earlier thinkers who developed philosophical frameworks that might help educators navigate the future. The Anglo-Irish writer Iris Murdoch, who made meaningful contributions as a philosopher as well as a novelist, developed synthetic concepts of *moral vision* and *loving, moral attention* that deserves and has received renewed consideration in our moment of technological disruption. Amidst a contemporary crisis in attention, Murdoch's thoughtful centering of *attention* as being essential to moral life deserves to be considered as a helpful corrective to some of the challenges of our time.

This paper argues that Murdoch's synthetic intellectual approach, which bridges philosophy, literature, religious thought, and psychology, models the kind of integrative thinking that ought to remain a feature of intellectual life. Murdoch's ideas about vision and attention may

¹ This is a fraught term, but I use it for the sake of convenience. The University of California (Irvine) defines it thusly: "True to its name, the humanities encompass everything human beings think and do. A humanities education provides a deep knowledge of history, language, literature, philosophy and the visual arts, and an understanding of the contributions of influential thinkers, writers and artists from many cultures." <https://uci.edu/academics/humanities.php>

be helpful to develop pedagogical strategies to preserve the enduring relevancy of humanities-oriented educational practices and sustain ourselves in an increasingly technologically distractible world. While Murdoch argued how sustained attention to literature can help develop moral insight, her understanding of how moral vision operates can also guide strategies for the development of genuine love and interest for long-form reading. Rather than relying on instrumentalist justifications and methods of assessment that recent technological developments have rendered obsolete, the future of education requires the practice of just the kind of sincere, sustained, cultivated loving attention that Murdoch placed at the center of her philosophy. In this paper, I attempt to offer an account of what Iris Murdoch intended her audience to understand by these concepts. I also suggest that Murdoch's philosophical thinking has an important synthetic character that bridges multiple disciplines and schools of thought. This, I argue, is a testament to the enduring value of thought that bridges any single discipline. In an age of distraction and increasing specialization, Murdoch's integrative approach serves to remind us of the enduring value of human complexity.

II. Murdoch's Oxford Origins & the Problems of Mid-Century Moral Philosophy

The philosophical orientation of Iris Murdoch (July 15, 1919 – February 8, 1999) was heavily influenced by her time at Oxford University from 1938-1942 and later as a fellow from 1948-1963. As authors Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman describe in their excellent book *Metaphysical Animals*, she was a member of the so-called "Oxford Quartet," a group of four young women who rose to considerable philosophical prominence over their lifetime. These remarkable individuals (Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Murdoch

herself) were four women who would go on to reshape moral philosophy in the mid-twentieth century. Murdoch's intellectual biography is inseparable from this formative environment. As Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman recount, the wartime university setting, the particular gender dynamics of the time², the legacy of Wittgenstein, and the sharp influence of philosophers like the positivist A. J. Ayer (and many others) led to a philosophically supercharged atmosphere where each member of the Quartet would go on to make their own important contributions. As Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman put it: "For all four friends, what mattered most was to bring philosophy back to life. Back to the context of the messy, everyday reality of human life lived with others. Back to the deep connection that ancient philosophers saw between Human Life, Goodness and Form. Back to the fact that we are living creatures, animals, whose nature shapes our ways of going on."³ Anscombe went on to work on ethics and intention, courageously & controversially speaking out against Oxford's decision to award an honorary degree to President Harry S. Truman in the wake of his order of the atomic bombings. Philippa Foot reintroduced Aristotelian virtue ethics into contemporary thought, helping to develop the famous "trolley-problem"⁴ thought-experiment along the way. Mary Midgley went on to become an important early thinker in the emerging field of animal ethics. Each of these young women, in her own way, sought to restore a measure of psychological realism to an academic philosophical culture that had arguably grown narrow in focus and thin in its picture of moral life.

² The members of the Quartet were trail-blazers as female philosophers in an academic environment that was primarily made up of men; a dynamic further disrupted at the advent of WW2

³ Clare Mac Cumhaill & Rachael Wiseman. *Metaphysical Animals*. Vintage Publishing, 2022. p. 295

⁴ "Is there a moral difference between doing harm and merely allowing harm?" <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/doing-allowing/>

Amidst this complex philosophical and historic milieu, a new academic divide was beginning to form in the discipline of academic philosophy. Later notions of a distinction between “Continental” vs. “Analytic” philosophy as two separate practices can be traced to this mid-20th century period.⁵ Although the philosophical analytic-continental divide had not yet formed into an extremely rigid disciplinary binary, the mid-twentieth-century context of Murdoch’s education was the period in which the styles, institutions, and intellectual sensibilities that come to be understood as the difference between analytic and continental philosophy were starting to form. In the decades after Murdoch’s education, “analytic philosophy” would increasingly come to imply a style characterized by conceptual clarity, argumentative rigor, linguistic analysis, and a suspicion of metaphysics.⁶ What began as a more of an orientation hardened into a recognizable disciplinary identity, often associated with questions and inquiry that engaged with logic, language, and the natural sciences. Murdoch was trained in this emerging milieu, however her work exists as a clear synthetic bridge between these two schools of approach. Some of her most important ideas can be read as being in dialogue with an analytic style that she perhaps felt needed to be softened with a continental edge.

Murdoch read widely and found inspiration in continental thinkers such as Simone Weil, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Martin Heidegger, as well as in the Christian, Platonic, and Hindu mystical traditions. She often emphasized her allegiance to a metaphysical vision far older than the analytic-continental divide; in one interview she approvingly cites Whitehead’s remark that all Western philosophy is a footnote to Plato, adding, “Plato is not only the father of our philosophy,

⁵ Hans-Johann Glock, *What is Analytic Philosophy?* (2008)

⁶ Beaney, Michael. *Analytic Philosophy : A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, United Kingdom, Oxford University Press, 2017. Chapter 1, “What is Analytic Philosophy?”

he is our best philosopher.”⁷ Given this breadth of influences, Murdoch’s work does not sit comfortably within any single philosophical label but rather is an interesting and early example of a philosophical project that synthesizes multiple styles.

Her famous essay “The Idea of Perfection” is arguably her most important essay and is a strong example of this synthetic approach. In this essay, Murdoch develops the concept of moral attention as a response to what she saw as the problems of the contemporary moral philosophy of her time. Although Murdoch’s style and concerns clearly reach beyond the analytic tradition, her position is best understood not as a departure from analytic philosophy but as a transformation from within it. She accepts the analytic virtues of clarity, argumentative discipline, and conceptual precision while resisting its tendency toward reductionism and moral minimalism. One might say (with a very non-analytic metaphor) that Murdoch’s idea of moral attention behaves like a vine that has grown out of the tidy garden of analytic philosophy, wandered through strange yet fertile lands, and returned bearing hybrid blossoms.

In this sense, “The Idea of Perfection” exemplifies an approach that is both rigorously analytic and genuinely synthetic. Its power lies not in rejecting analytic methods but in enlarging them, drawing on a range of philosophical, literary, and religious sources to address the enduring problem of how human beings see, imagine, and respond to one another. If moral attention succeeds as a philosophical concept, then it also demonstrates the value of Murdoch’s wider intellectual method: a commitment to reading broadly, thinking capaciously, and integrating insights across traditions in order to confront the complexity of the moral life.

⁷ Murdoch, Iris and Peter J. Conradi. *Existentialists and Mystics, Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. p. 42

Murdoch opens “The Idea of Perfection” with an observation about the nature of philosophy itself: it “has in a sense to keep trying to return to the beginning: a thing which it is not at all easy to do.” This seemingly simple remark announces her overall approach. She aims to question what she sees as the hasty theoretical constructions of contemporary moral philosophy by returning to examine their foundations. For Murdoch, certain basic features of moral life have been “forgotten or ‘theorized away’” by her contemporaries (such as R. M. Hare, A. J. Ayer, and Stuart Hampshire).

What are these forgotten facts? Murdoch identifies two: “the fact that an unexamined life can be virtuous and the fact that love is a central concept in morals.” These are not arbitrary. They mark the points at which she believes moral philosophy has gone astray in its fixation on choice, consciousness, and publicly verifiable behavior. Her contemporaries, she argues, “constantly talk of freedom” but “rarely talk of love.” This imbalance suggests a deeper distortion in how moral philosophers picture human psychology.

The problem she sees with some of the contemporary thinkers of her time is drawn partly from Stuart Hampshire’s *Thought and Action*. She is critiquing what she calls an “existentialist-behaviorist” view of the moral agent. This outlook combines behaviorism’s emphasis on observable action with existentialism’s emphasis on a sovereign choosing will. In such a view, the inner life becomes “parasitic” on outward conduct, while the will stands isolated as the sole locus of agency. The result is a kind of dualism. She critiques this framework as an impersonal world of facts on one side with a purified will making choices on the other.

Murdoch finds this picture philosophically inadequate and experientially false. It fails to capture the continuous texture of moral life. She is interested in the slow transformation of vision, the way our perception of others evolves through patient attention, and the role of love in moral understanding. More seriously, she believes this dualism rests on a misapplication of Wittgenstein's insights. Where Wittgenstein offered careful remarks about the grammar of psychological concepts, his successors rushed to derive sweeping claims about the structure of human nature.

Murdoch traces the roots of this distorted picture through twentieth-century moral philosophy. She identifies G. E. Moore as "the frame of the picture": his separation of fact and value, intended as a safeguard for the distinctiveness of the good, became the starting point for an account in which goodness is reduced to "a movable label affixed to the world." Her predecessors, she argues, were driven by a desire to secure human freedom by divorcing it from the world of facts. She sees this as understandable but ultimately misguided.

In one of the essay's most striking passages, she diagnoses how disparate philosophical movements collectively contribute to a reductive moral psychology. Against the background of Wittgenstein's "sphinx-like" silence, she writes, neo-Kantianism, existentialism, and utilitarianism have "hastened to draw further and more dubious moral and psychological conclusions," converging on an image of moral personality in which the inner life is hazy or nonexistent. As she writes:

But, as I have said, while Wittgenstein remains sphinx-like in the background, others have hastened to draw further and more dubious moral and psychological conclusions. Wittgenstein has created a void into which neo-Kantianism, existentialism, utilitarianism have made haste to enter. And notice how plausibly the arguments, their prestige enhanced from undoubted success in other fields, seem to support, indeed to impose, the image of personality which I have sketched

above. As the 'inner life' is hazy, largely absent, and any way 'not part of the mechanism', it turns out to be logically impossible to take up an idle contemplative attitude to the good. Morality must be action since mental concepts can only be analysed genetically. Metaphors of movement and not vision seem obviously appropriate. Morality, with the full support of logic, abhors the private. Salvation by works is a conceptual necessity. What I am doing or being is not something private and personal, but is imposed upon me in the sense of being identifiable only via public concepts and objective observers. Self-knowledge is something which shows overtly. Reasons are public reasons, rules are public rules. Reason and rule represent a sort of impersonal tyranny in relation to which however the personal will represents perfect freedom. The machinery is relentless, but until the moment of choice the agent is outside the machinery. Morality resides at the point of action. What I am 'objectively' is not under my control; logic and observers decide that. What I am 'subjectively' is a foot-loose, solitary, substanceless will. Personality dwindles to a point of pure will.⁸

Surveying this landscape, Murdoch sees vast territories abandoned. Analytic moral philosophy has neglected the inner world of moral reflection; psychoanalysis, though suggestive, remains "muddled and embryonic"; existentialism leaves the agent stranded in radical freedom. These traditions share, she argues, a common flaw: "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 it is utilitarian in its assumption that morality... can only be concerned with public acts."⁹ The result is the haunting image of "the fearful solitude of the individual marooned upon a tiny island in the middle of a sea of scientific facts."¹⁰ Murdoch is not the first (or last) philosopher to identify the contemplative individual as being lost at sea, but she does proffer a possible solution.

It is this isolation of the moral agent from the world that Murdoch's concept of moral attention seeks to overcome. Against the sharp divisions between fact and value, will and world, public action and inner vision, she proposes a different picture in which moral progress comes through

⁸ Murdoch, Iris, and Peter J Conradi. "The Idea of Perfection." *Existentialists and Mystics : Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, Penguin, 1999. P 390

⁹ Murdoch, Iris, and Peter J Conradi. "The Idea of Perfection." *Existentialists and Mystics : Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, Penguin, 1999. p. 383

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 401

patient, loving attention to reality. Through attentive effort, Murdoch suggests that human beings might find a possible path from the problems of solitary self-deception.

III. The Concept of Moral Attention & Philosophical Synthesis

“...*Attention is the effort to counteract such states of illusion.*” - IM

Murdoch introduces the concept of moral attention through a deceptively simple (if rather quirky!) example involving a mother-in-law (M) and her daughter-in-law (D)¹¹. At first, M sees D as “unpolished, lacking in dignity and refinement... tiresomely juvenile.”¹² Over time, through what Murdoch describes as an active moral effort, M gradually comes to see D differently: as “not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful.”¹³ Importantly, nothing changes in D’s behavior, and M’s outward conduct toward her remains consistently polite. The transformation occurs entirely within M’s inner life. This subtle example is Murdoch’s entrance into the idea of *moral attention*: an activity of a sustained, loving, truthful regard directed at another person with the aim of seeing them more justly.

But what, exactly, is happening in this process of attention? For Murdoch, this inward transformation represents a kind of moral labor that mainstream moral philosophy has struggled either to notice or to describe. It is neither a simple matter of choosing differently (as existentialism might suggest) nor reducible to outward behavior (as behaviorism proposes). Instead, it is a continuous discipline of vision and imagination, it is “a task of attention that goes

¹¹ The example of a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law speaks to Murdoch’s novelist instincts as well as a cultural approach that is oriented to the common audience, perhaps with a tinge of mischief.

¹² Murdoch, Iris, and Peter J Conradi. “The Idea of Perfection.” *Existentialists and Mystics : Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, Penguin, 1999. p. 391

¹³ Ibid. p. 392

on all the time.”¹⁴ This attention is both cognitive and moral: it involves seeing, but seeing in a *moral* sense, where coming to see more clearly is itself a moral achievement.

This becomes even clearer when we consider what Murdoch means by *seeing reality*. Reality, in moral contexts, is not a set of neutral facts but an ideal that guides moral effort. When M strives to see D “as she really is,” she is not achieving a final, static insight; she is engaging an unending discipline of vision. Others are inexhaustible. The world is always more complex than our fantasies about it. The work of attention therefore has no endpoint - not because we fail, but because reality itself continually exceeds any one moment of moral perception.

The effects of this attention are profoundly moral. Through patient, loving attention, M generates an inner moral activity that shapes her character. Far from being a shadowy or merely “private” psychological phenomenon, this activity forms the core of Murdoch’s conception of moral life. As she puts it, such inner work is “something which we approve of, something which is somehow worth doing in itself.”¹⁵ It is also deeply personal: “peculiarly her own. Its details are the details of this personality.”¹⁶ This inward labor contributes to freedom and individuality. She is describing not the abstract, voluntarist freedom of choosing at a moment of crisis, but the deeper freedom of becoming capable of perceiving more justly.

For Murdoch, moral attention is itself a virtue, perhaps even the central virtue from which others flow. It demands humility (acknowledging that one’s vision may be clouded), courage (the willingness to revise comforting fictions), justice (the desire to see the other as they truly are),

¹⁴ Murdoch, Iris. *The Sovereignty of Good*. London, Routledge, 2014. p. 36

¹⁵ Murdoch, Iris, and Peter J Conradi. “The Idea of Perfection.” *Existentialists and Mystics : Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, Penguin, 1999. p. 394

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 397

and above all love (a patient, generous receptivity to reality). In this way, moral attention is not simply a means to moral knowledge; it is an ongoing practice of moral becoming, a mode of life through which the moral agent slowly comes into clearer relation with the world.

At the same time, Murdoch's own language slides easily from *attention* into *vision*: she speaks of "clear vision," "distorted vision," "fresh vision," and even suggests that moral disagreements are "differences of vision rather than of choice."¹⁷ This raises a further question that recent commentators have tried to clarify: how exactly are we to understand moral vision, and what is the relation between moral attention, moral perception, and what Murdoch sometimes calls a "just and loving gaze"?¹⁸ It is to this question that I now turn.

Murdoch's language in "The Idea of Perfection" and *The Sovereignty of Good* moves easily between talk of *attention* and talk of *vision*. She speaks of "fresh vision," of "clear" and "distorted" vision, and even claims that moral disagreements are often "differences of vision not of choice."¹⁹ It is natural, then, to ask what exactly is meant by this visual metaphor. Are we supposed to imagine a special moral sense, a kind of "moral perception," or is something else going on?

The academic Anil Gomes, in his helpful essay "Iris Murdoch: Moral Vision," suggests that the phrase "moral vision" is actually ambiguous. It can mean, first, vision of moral things -

¹⁷ Murdoch, Iris, and Peter J Conradi. "Vision and Choice in Morality." *Existentialists and Mystics : Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, Penguin, 1999. p 383

¹⁸ Murdoch, Iris, and Peter J Conradi. "The Idea of Perfection." *Existentialists and Mystics : Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, Penguin, 1999. p. 409

¹⁹ Murdoch, Iris, and Peter J Conradi. "Vision and Choice in Morality." *Existentialists and Mystics : Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, Penguin, 1999. p 142

roughly, a capacity to perceive moral features of the world, just as we perceive colors or shapes. Or it can mean, second, vision which is itself moral - where the very activity of seeing is something that can be evaluated as just, loving, distorted, or self-deceived. Both of these capture something important in Murdoch, but Gomes warns that each, taken by itself, can mislead. For Murdoch, he argues, “there is no distinctively moral vision. There is only vision: a just and loving gaze directed upon the reality of others.”²⁰

This helps clarify how moral attention and moral vision relate. In my reading, and in light of Gomes, we might say that *attention* names the work, the ongoing discipline: the effort to look again, to resist fantasy, to think of another person in truer, less self-serving terms. *Vision*, by contrast, names the resulting way things come to appear when that effort has borne some fruit. Attention is the moral labor; vision is the gradually transformed field in which the world and others show up differently. There is no special “moral sense” in addition to ordinary perception. There is, instead, ordinary perception purified, redirected, and deepened by loving attention. Gomes situates this in terms of three commitments he finds in Murdoch’s work: realism, knowability, and concept involvement. The world really does contain such features as kindness, meanness, generosity, and cruelty; these are not just projections of our preferences but aspects of reality. We can sometimes come to *know* these aspects of reality. And that knowing is always mediated by the concepts, images, and forms of understanding we bring to bear. Our “vision” is therefore never neutral: it is shaped by our conceptual scheme and, more deeply, by our fantasies, fears, and loves. Moral attention, on this picture, is the work of slowly revising that scheme to find more truthful ways of seeing individuals and reality itself.

²⁰ Gomes, Anil. “Iris Murdoch: Moral Vision.” 2020. <https://philarchive.org/archive/GOMIMM>

One of Gomes's most useful points is that Murdoch's perfectionism about concepts reaches beyond explicitly ethical vocabulary. She famously suggests that "all universals are concrete," and even invites us to consider "red as an ideal end-point, as a concept infinitely to be learned, as an individual object of love."²¹ If that is right, then "moral vision" cannot be neatly restricted to the deployment of a special moral lexicon. The mother-in-law's improvement does not consist in applying a new set of technical moral terms to her daughter-in-law; it consists in finding better, truer descriptions - "spontaneous," "gay," "delightfully youthful" - which allow the reality of this particular person to appear more justly. The work of moral attention is thus continuous with the general work of refining our concepts under the regulative ideal of a moral way of seeing.

This also explains why Murdoch thinks the same ego-defeating effort is needed to see both "a blade of grass" and "another person." The obstacle is the same in both cases: the "fat relentless ego," the tissue of comforting fantasies that Murdoch thinks stands between us and reality. To look at anything - natural world or human being - "justly and lovingly" is to engage in a kind of moral purification. In that sense, vision itself becomes answerable to an ideal. But as Gomes stresses, we do not need to posit a special moral faculty or a sharply bounded moral domain to make sense of this. What matters is not that we have a separate moral sense, but that all of our seeing is susceptible to moral improvement.

From this angle, "moral vision" is not a technical term for a discrete capacity. It is a way of talking about what ordinary vision looks like when it has been trained by loving attention. To see someone justly is to see them under concepts refined by

²¹ Murdoch, Iris, and Peter J Conradi. "The Idea of Perfection." *Existentialists and Mystics : Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, Penguin, 1999. p. 404

patient effort, freed (partially, never completely) from egoistic distortion. Loving vision is the name Murdoch gives to this state: a vision in which attention has done its work, and reality is allowed (however briefly!) to come through. However we parse Murdoch's language, the arc of her thinking bends toward the conclusion that morality happens first in the quiet, unseen labor of attention. Vision becomes Murdoch's name for the inward work through which the self struggles to clear away ego, illusion, and fantasy, until the world (and other people) can be seen more justly. Moral attention and moral vision, then, are not two doctrines but two faces of the same practice. The activity is required is that of patient and lifelong effort to look at reality with greater honesty, tenderness, and care.

This moral achievement and rescue of an inner life is thus offered as a solution to her diagnosis of the problems of contemporary moral philosophy. In her generation of this idea, Murdoch synthesizes the ideas of a large number of thinkers from many different traditions, most notably Simone Weil's spiritual psychology of attention, Wittgenstein's reticent descriptive method, and the Platonic-Moorean conviction that goodness is a real but infinitely elusive ideal. We have already seen how she was responding to problems that she saw in philosophers such as Hampshire, Ayer, Sartre, G. E. Moore, and others. Let us now consider the contributing influences of these others that she draws upon to construct her concept of moral attention.

Chief among the inspirations from which she draws is the French philosopher Simone Weil. From her Murdoch takes not just the term "attention" itself but a whole orientation toward moral perception - the idea of patient waiting, of "unselfing," and of will as obedience rather than pure choice. As Murdoch explains, "I have used the word 'attention', which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I

believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent.”²² According to the philosopher Mark Fortney, it is probable that Murdoch is specifically inspired by Weil’s idea of a sort of diffuse and spiritual attention that she describes in the essay “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God.”²³ Yet where Weil’s concept was explicitly religious, Murdoch transforms it into a secular framing while preserving its essential insights about the importance of moving beyond ego to see reality clearly. I would further suggest that we might think of this “attention” as being perhaps inspired by and certainly similar to meditative practices as described in various spiritual traditions. The act of directed attention, whether as part of a meditative practice or an ethical exercise, can be an exhaustive exercise but through practice becomes more natural and sustainable. Just as meditation often involves the continuous redirection of attention away from distracting thoughts and back to the object of meditation, Murdoch’s moral attention involves the ongoing effort to see past our own prejudices, fantasies, and ego-driven narratives to perceive the reality of others more clearly. In both cases, the practice involves a kind of “unselfing” - a moving away from our habitual self-centered patterns of thought toward a clearer and more objective vision.

For Murdoch, moral attention is a continuous ethical effort that is distinguished from sporadic moments of individual choice. Like meditation, moral attention is not something achieved once and for all but must be constantly renewed through patient practice. The mother-in-law in Murdoch’s example isn’t making a single decision to see her daughter-in-law

²² Murdoch, Iris, and Peter J Conradi. “The Idea of Perfection.” *Existentialists and Mystics : Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, Penguin, 1999. p. 409

²³ Fortney, Mark. *Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch on Insight and Attention* | *Blog of the APA*. 29 Nov. 2022, blog.apaonline.org/2022/11/29/simone-weil-and-iris-murdoch-on-insight-and-attention/.

differently; she's engaging in an ongoing process of attention that gradually transforms her perception. This understanding of moral development as a kind of practice rather than a series of decisions helps explain why Murdoch insists that "attention is our daily bread" and why she sees moral progress as an endless task.

Although Murdoch borrows most directly from Weil, we can sense the influences of other thinkers in her concept of moral attention. While Murdoch believes that some of Wittgenstein's ideas may have contributed to the errors of those who followed him in the tradition of analytic philosophy, she clearly respected the man and took some inspiration from his ideas. She seems inclined to think that later philosophers misinterpreted him and failed to preserve an epistemic modesty about the status of the inner life. As she notes, "Wittgenstein of course discusses in this context mental as well as physical concepts. But his discussion is marked by a peculiar reticence. He does not make any moral or psychological generalizations."²⁴ This "reticence" is something that Murdoch admires. Wittgenstein's famous instruction, "Don't think, but look!"²⁵ encapsulates an approach to philosophy that privileges careful observation over abstract theorizing. Although Murdoch was not exactly a Wittgensteinian, we can see the similarities of her emphasis on the importance of *vision* in contrast with the perils of developing abstruse theorizing. Wittgenstein's exhortation to patiently observe is for Murdoch transformed into a moral virtue; the activity of precise and patient observation is shown to be the key to ethical life itself.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 385

²⁵ Wittgenstein, PI 66. As discussed: View. "“Don't Think, but Look!” – the Most Common Misconception about Wittgenstein?" *Recollecting Philosophy*, 18 Jan. 2013, recollectingphilosophy.wordpress.com/2013/01/18/dont-think-but-look-the-most-common-misconception-about-wittgenstein/.

This ethical life is for Murdoch is connected with some notion of “goodness,” which for her is connected to the Platonic ideal of “the Good.” The full extent of Murdoch’s Platonic influences are more readily apparent in other texts, such as "The Sovereignty of Good" (particularly in the essay "The Good Beyond Being"), "The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists," and "Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals."²⁶ The writer and academic Heather Widdows discusses this at some length in her book *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch*.²⁷ Within the context of *The Idea of Perfection*, Murdoch introduces “goodness” in the context of G. E. Moore, who she notes, “believed that good was a supersensible reality, that it was a mysterious quality, unrepresentable and indefinable.”²⁸ While Moore's successors rejected this view, arguing instead that "Good must be thought of, not as part of the world, but as a movable label affixed to the world," Murdoch finds herself more aligned with Moore's original position.²⁹ Her discussion of Plato in this context is more focused on the connection between beauty and goodness, noting that "Plato, who tells us that beauty is the only spiritual thing which we love immediately by nature, treats the beautiful as an introductory section of the good.”³⁰ A desire for moral good, as aesthetic appreciation, becomes a kind of lodestone that draws patient attention that progressively reveals reality. Towards the end of her essay, she offers her own view, writing:

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. Moore

²⁶ Murdoch, Iris. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. London, Vintage, 2003.

²⁷ See chapters 1 “The Breadth of Iris Murdoch’s Vision” and 4 “The Good.” Widdows, Heather. *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch*. Aldershot, Hants, England, Ashgate Pub, 2005.

²⁸ Murdoch, Iris, and Peter J Conradi. “The Idea of Perfection.” *Existentialists and Mystics : Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, Penguin, 1999. p. 377

²⁹ “let me say in anticipation that on almost every point I agree with Moore and not with his critics. “*Ibid*, p. 377

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 416

was in a way nearer the truth than he realized when he tried to say both that Good was there and that one could say nothing of what it essentially was. If apprehension of good is apprehension of the individual and the real, then good partakes of the infinite elusive character of reality.³¹

There is almost something mathematical in how Murdoch is thinking of the Good, a kind of infinitely distant conceptual point that can only be approached but never achieved. It is as if goodness is at the limit of calculus, or like a geometric point at infinity where parallel lines meet. Murdoch's conception of the Good functions as what she calls an "ideal limit" - a concept that avoids "the rulings of an impersonal public language" but instead orients moral perception and effort while remaining perpetually beyond full attainment. This concept, while perhaps not exactly the same as the Platonic ideal of "the Form of the Good," once again demonstrates how Murdoch synthesizes philosophical ideals from a variety of origins.

IV. Simone Weil and the Education of Attention

It is worth considering more closely the influence of Weil and her essay "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" on Murdoch's thinking, particularly in the context of how Murdoch's ideas might be shed light on contemporary issues in education. Weil provides Murdoch with a concept of attention that places it squarely in the pedagogical, ethical, and - most importantly - the spiritual domains. She proposes it as a central moral activity. Through attentive prayer, people can come into contact with God. The value of scholastic study, for Weil, is to sharpen the capacity of attention such that attentive prayer becomes possible. In discussing how students might prefer one subject over another, she explains that each subject should be valued for this capacity, writing: "They should learn to like all these

³¹ Ibid, p. 417

subjects, because all of them develop that faculty of attention which, directed toward God, is the very substance of prayer.”³² Weil’s short essay appears to be about education but is really a kind of religious tract, a manual for how the young person’s soul might be trained to attend to the glory of God. Attention, she writes, is a “kind of suspended thought, a hovering of the mind... above the object without seeking it.”³³ The very difficulty of schoolwork becomes spiritually productive. The struggle to focus on Latin declensions or geometric propositions becomes the path through which one acquires the capacity to love God. For Weil, the ultimate aim of this training is religious.

Murdoch’s takes Weil’s ideas and makes a major turn of her own. She secularizes this paradigm. One often senses (in her novels and elsewhere) a certain ambiguity about religion. She described herself as a “Christian Buddhist,” attended communion at Anglican services, but did not receive communion or profess a clear belief in God. If attention for Weil relates to the love of God, Murdoch chooses to instead leave that question unanswered and instead propose that attention can be an engine for the love of one’s neighbor. For both, attention is something that can be cultivated through habit and training.

A second key point from Weil is the notion of “unselfing,” which Murdoch adopts almost wholesale. Weil describes attention as a movement away from the self, a displacement of the ego that allows the world to appear as it is. The ego, for Weil, is a kind of gravitational pull that bends perception toward fantasy. To attend is to break this gravitational field. Murdoch echoes this idea repeatedly, calling the ego “the greatest enemy of vision” and describing moral life as

³² Weil, Simone. “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God”

³³ Ibid, p. 111

the attempt to “pierce the veil of selfish consciousness.”³⁴ Murdoch does not, however, share Weil’s theological teleology. For Weil, attention ultimately opens the soul to God; for Murdoch, it opens the self to the reality of others. But the structure of their thought is aligned as both believe that the moral life is a process of constant decentering, a relinquishing of self-focused fantasy in order to reveal reality.

Weil also influenced Murdoch’s understanding of the emotional texture of moral life. Weil insists that attention is never merely cognitive. It is always tinged with love, humility, and reverence. Murdoch likewise rejects the idea that attention is a cold or clinical form of seeing. She describes the mother-in-law’s transformation not as an intellectual revision but as a loving re-seeing. For both thinkers, attention requires a posture of affection toward what is real. Weil describes attention as “the rarest and purest form of generosity,” an attitude of tenderness towards the world.³⁵ Murdoch calls it “a just and loving gaze.”³⁶ Both argue that the ethical life depends on the capacity to look at another person without the distortions introduced by fear, resentment, vanity, or self-love. Instead, what is necessary are the correct application of virtuous “concepts.” As the Murdoch scholar Camille Braune writes in an essay discussing Weil’s influence on Murdoch, “If attention – as opposed to mere “looking” – is what reveals moral reality, that is because moral reality (and reality more generally) is not simply and immediately

³⁴ Murdoch, Iris, and Peter J Conradi. “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts.” *Existentialists and Mystics : Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, Penguin, 1999. p. 469

³⁵ Weil, Simone. *Gravity and Grace*. London ; New York, Routledge, 2002.

³⁶ Murdoch, Iris, and Peter J Conradi. “The Idea of Perfection.” *Existentialists and Mystics : Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, Penguin, 1999. p. 409

available to anyone, but requires the correct application of concepts, the use of the imagination to disclose possibilities, and virtues such as honesty, humility, truthfulness, patience, and love.”³⁷

It is also important that Weil ties attention so closely to forms of study, discipline, ritual, and practice. Education, for Weil, is not a matter of information but of shaping the soul’s capacity for attention. Here Murdoch sees a similar insight applicable to humanistic education. The study of literature, drama, history, and philosophy could be the kinds of pursuits that train the mind to inhabit complexity, tolerate ambiguity, and sustain attention on the particular. Murdoch’s later claim that “the study of literature [is] an education in how to picture and understand human situations” is a direct outgrowth of Weil’s pedagogical commitments.³⁸ Where Weil speaks of school studies preparing the soul for prayer, Murdoch sees education and reading as preparation for compassion and moral clarity.

Murdoch’s engagement with Simone Weil thus provides not only the vocabulary of “attention” and “unselfing” but also a model of how disciplined practices can shape the moral imagination. Weil treats schoolwork as training for prayer; Murdoch secularizes this idea, treating the sustained effort to look carefully at the world as training for compassion and clarity. Her novels repeatedly dramatize the struggle to not fall into pits of self-deception. Characters like Dora in *The Bell* or Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, The Sea* attempt (and often comically fail) to see others without the distortions of ego and fantasy. The ideas and paradigms of Weil and Murdoch often emerge from the gripping plot-lines of her novels to considerable effect.

³⁷ Braune, Camille. “From Inattentiveness towards Moral Failures: Acknowledging Simone Weil in Iris Murdoch’s Literary Writings.” *Labyrinth*, vol. 25, no. 2, 15 Jan. 2024, pp. 47–73, <https://doi.org/10.25180/lj.v25i2.341>.

³⁸ Murdoch, Iris, and Peter J Conradi. “The Idea of Perfection” *Existentialists and Mystics : Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, Penguin, 1999. p. 408

V. The Synthesis of Literature and Philosophy

Although widely known as a philosophical-novelist, Murdoch herself resisted the title. In an interview she rejected efforts to too easily conflate the two professions, claiming in response to BBC journalist Bryan Magee (who had noticed the philosophy in her novels), that: "I am not in any sense a philosophical novelist. If I had known about sailing ships I should have put in sailing ships. As it was, I knew about philosophy."³⁹

It can be seen, however, this interest in two separate disciplines as yet another instance of Murdoch's broader philosophical method of synthesis. While Murdoch wishes to preserve literature and philosophy as separate domains⁴⁰, she sees both as connected to the human effort to understand reality. She makes this connection explicit when discussing art and morality: "One of the great merits of the moral psychology which I am proposing is that it does not contrast art and morals, but shows them to be two aspects of a single struggle."⁴¹ She criticizes the existentialist-behaviorist view which could "give no satisfactory account of art: it was seen as a quasi-play activity, gratuitous, 'for its own sake' (the familiar Kantian-Bloomsbury slogan), a sort

³⁹ Murdoch, Iris. Interview with Bryan Magee. *Men of Ideas*. BBC Television, 1978.

⁴⁰ A more complete discussion of how she sees the distinction between the two disciplines I include here: "Philosophy aims to clarify and to explain, it states and attempts to solve very difficult highly technical problems and the writing must be subservient to this aim. One might say that bad philosophy is not philosophy, whereas bad art is still art. There are all sorts of ways in which we tend to forgive literature, but we do not forgive philosophy. Literature is read by many and various people, philosophy by very few. Serious artists are their own critics and do not usually work for an audience of 'experts'. Besides, art is fun and for fun, it has innumerable intentions and charms. Literature interests us on different levels in different fashions. It is full of tricks and magic and deliberate mystification. Literature entertains, it does many things, and philosophy does one thing." Murdoch, Iris, and Peter J Conradi. "Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee" *Existentialists and Mystics : Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, Penguin, 1999. p. 39

⁴¹ Murdoch, Iris, and Peter J Conradi. "The Idea of Perfection" *Existentialists and Mystics : Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, Penguin, 1999. p. 415

of by-product of our failure to be entirely rational.”⁴² Against this, Murdoch proposes that art, literature, and morality all require the same sustained, tolerant, ego-free attention to what is real. There is a sense that for Murdoch literature is a kind of training ground for ethics; a gymnasium in which one can cultivate the capacity for moral attention. In contrasting the study of literature in contrast to that of science, she rather provocatively claims: “the most essential and fundamental aspect of culture is the study of literature, since this is an education in how to picture and understand human situations.”⁴³ Implicit in such an idea is a possible framework for the critical evaluation of taste and judgment of different kinds of arts and literature, a complex topic that Murdoch explores at some length in her interviews contained within the book *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. It might be tempting to extrapolate from Murdoch’s philosophy & model of ethics a theory of criticism to evaluate art or literature. One can imagine the possibility of evaluating a text on the basis of how its capacity to develop moral vision, or to understand more empathetically. Murdoch as a novelist did seek to do just that, inviting her readers into the complexities of the inner worlds of her characters. Nevertheless, she is cautious about the development of any formal theory of criticism, saying: “...critics are better off without any close-knit systematic background theory, scientific or philosophical. A good critic is a relaxed polymath.”⁴⁴ It is perhaps this spirit of being a “relaxed polymath,” or an intellectual capable of synthesizing ideas from a wide range of sources, that is at the bedrock of Murdoch’s approach towards philosophical and literary thought.

⁴² Ibid, p. 416

⁴³ Ibid, p. 408

⁴⁴ Murdoch, Iris, and Peter J Conradi. “Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee.” *Existentialists and Mystics : Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. New York, Penguin, 1999. p. 63

In our discussion of Murdoch's concept of moral attention, we've seen how it emerges from a synthesis of diverse philosophical influences and traditions. Inspired by religious thinkers like Simone Weil, classical philosophers like Plato, and modern figures like Wittgenstein, Murdoch creates something new that directly addresses the problems she identifies in the moral philosophy of her time. Her goal is to offer a genuine alternative to both the existentialist emphasis on pure choice and a behaviorist reduction to external action. She rescues the inner life and emphasizes moral attention as a new and meaningful method of human ethical conduct. The strength of Murdoch's philosophical synthesis lies not merely in its broad integration of different traditions, but in how effectively it addresses the problems she identified in moral philosophy. By reading widely and finding inspiration outside of a single intellectual tradition, Murdoch shows how a careful synthesis can generate solutions to persistent philosophical problems. In her own example as a writer and thinker who creatively wrestled with some of the most pressing questions of what it is to be a human being, we should not hesitate to synthesize her ideas into our own intellectual and ethical models.

VI. Conclusion: Moral Attention in the Age of Fractured Attention

Why does Murdoch matter now? How should we think about Iris Murdoch and her philosophical ideas today? I began this paper with a reference to a “contemporary crisis in education” and that Iris Murdoch’s ideas could be useful today. It is worth observing that education is always in a constant state of crisis. For centuries, critics of education and technological change have lamented every generational trouble. Given the steady frequency by which proclamations of educational doom have been declared, we should be cautious about whether anxieties about contemporary conditions are really as singular as they may feel in the present moment. Perhaps proclamations about the decline of education have more to do with generational transitions and reactionary instincts than they do with actual degradation. In the 20th century, writers such as John Dewey (*The School and the Society*, 1899), Irving Babbitt (*Literature and the American College*, 1908), Robert Hutchins (*The Higher Learning in America*, 1936), Richard Hofstadter (*Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, 1963), Allan Bloom (*The Closing of the American Mind*, 1987), Neil Postman (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 1985 and *The End of Education*, 1995) have, from a variety of political and scholarly perspectives, advanced different versions of arguments about the decline of the practice of education. Other older thinkers from Nietzsche (“On the Future of Our Educational Institutions,” 1872) to Rousseau (*Emile, or On Education*, 1762), and Adam Smith (*The Wealth of Nations, Book V*, 1776) advanced critiques of education that were written in response to the technical, sociological, and cultural transitions of their time. There are interesting strands of similarity as well as distinction between all of these writers, but there is a common notion that somehow the practice of education has gone seriously astray. Given this legacy, perhaps we can take solace that

contemporary anxieties are but the latest in a long tradition of educational concerns. This suggests that educators will continue to muddle along one way or another as they always have. However, current technological developments present some complications that differ qualitatively from previous periods.

One challenging feature of modern life has become a generalized erosion of *attention* as a consequence of the increasing presence of digital devices in our lives. This particular strand has existed in its present form for several decades. Some sense of the perils of digital distraction is probably all too familiar to anyone who reads this essay. A wide variety of popular and academic writers have also described this phenomenon in considerable detail. In her book *Attention Span*, UCI Professor of Informatics Gloria Mark describes how, “Our modern digital era has caused a fundamental shift in how we think and work, and in how we focus our attention and achieve fulfillment. The technology we use on an everyday basis, our cultural and social environments, and our individual human nature together make it hard to focus.”⁴⁵ In her book, Professor Mark summarizes decades of research about the ways in which computing devices have affected the lives of those who use them. One of the observations she makes is that the average duration of attention on one screen before switching to another has rapidly decreased in recent years. When she began studying this practice in 2004, the average length a user spent on a screen before switching to another was 152 seconds, this has plummeted more recently to a median of 40 seconds⁴⁶. Similar findings about the increasing impact of digital device design is found by other researchers. While there is considerable nuance to this topic, another striking finding from the

⁴⁵ Mark, Gloria. *Attention Span: A Groundbreaking Way to Restore Balance, Happiness and Productivity*. Hanover Square Press, 10 Jan. 2023. p. 23

⁴⁶ Ibid, pp. 102-103

American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education suggests that decreasing rates in drug and alcohol addiction have been substituted by an addiction to smartphone use and digital technologies.⁴⁷ While any reduction in chemical dependency is good news, it is alarming that devices that enable similar levels of habit-inducing behavior have become an omnipresent feature of modern classroom life. Unlike traditional substances of abuse, smartphones and digital technologies are not only socially acceptable but increasingly essential for participation in contemporary society and educational institutions. While digital technologies offer undeniable benefits in terms of efficiency and access to information, there is evidence (both formal and anecdotal) to suggest that these advantages may come at the cost of our ability to engage in the kind of sustained, focused attention that serious intellectual work and learning require. Murdoch's account of moral attention is thus not only a moral psychology but also an alternative and possible model for the kind of integrative, cross-disciplinary thinking that we should support in an era of increasingly fractured attention.⁴⁸

Is Iris Murdoch's focus on old fashioned loving moral attention really likely to inspire students to put away their smartphones and pick up *Middlemarch*? This is unlikely, and Murdoch herself would absolutely be skeptical of narratives of easy solution or instrumentalist responses. She offers no "fix," no pedagogical technique to be scaled or implemented. What she offers instead is the possibility of intellectual life that is genuinely multi-disciplinary and synthetic in

⁴⁷ Jeff Cain, "It's Time to Confront Student Mental Health Issues Associated with Smartphones and Social Media," *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education* 82, no. 7 (2018): 6862

⁴⁸ It is worth noting that, in contrast to the William James claim that "Everyone knows what attention is", *attention* is not so easily known, understood, or defined. The term is used in a wide variety of contexts, technological as well as social, it is more of a gesture towards a concept than something so easily defined. I hope that this paper will, at least, offer some account of *moral attention* as an activity that Murdoch centered in her philosophy.

approach. She presents a clear picture of moral life that speaks to the moment, the self as capable of slow inner transformation, a clearing away of the ego, a process by which to see clearly and see reality as it is.

If there is a lesson for the present moment, it is that the crisis of fractured attention cannot be solved at the level at which it is felt. It will not be resolved by productivity strategies, platform adjustments, or further technological acceleration. Her insistence that moral life begins in how we *see* in a “just and loving gaze” directed toward another person stands as a quiet rebuke to a culture increasingly fixated on the visible, measurable, and performative.

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