

IRIS MURDOCH ON THE ROLE OF ART IN MORAL PERCEPTION

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“Art is our supreme clue to morals”
- Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*

INTRODUCTION*

Throughout her work, Iris Murdoch often touches on the intersection between ethics and aesthetics, in particular focussing on art’s role in moral perception. As a novelist and philosopher, Murdoch asks, “What is a good man like? How can we make ourselves morally better?”¹ While she looks to aesthetics to address *each* of these questions, the literature to date has overwhelmingly focussed on the latter. Murdoch does not limit herself to the question of whether art can make us “morally better”. She also asks how art can help us understand what it is to be moral.

The literature on Murdoch concerned exclusively with the intersection of aesthetics and ethics is limited. Moreover, within this literature, there is little debate about the role that art plays in moral perception. The dominant reading is that art is a *vehicle* through which we can achieve moral perception. On this view, critics including Anil Gomes and Elizabeth Burns argue that art, under certain conditions, can serve a practical purpose by allowing us to perceive of its subject matter morally. Therefore, looking at art can in some circumstances allow us to actually experience moral perception. Discussions here have in particular tended towards Murdoch’s role in “philosophy’s turn to literature”.² While I do not dispute that this is a legitimate reading of Murdoch’s aesthetics, my concern is that it is not exhaustive. Rather, Murdoch’s account of the role of art in moral perception is more complex. Murdoch also argues that art plays a useful explanatory role insofar as aesthetic and moral perceptions are analogous. That is, in identifying the similarities between aesthetic and moral perception, we can come to a better understanding of what moral perception *is*.

A more detailed discussion of Murdoch’s account of moral perception and art will follow, but for the sake of clarity, I will begin with some basic definitions. I intend the notion of art to be read broadly as referring to any medium, including sculpture, painting, poetry, literature,

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¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 2014), 51.

² Floora Ruokonen, “Iris Murdoch and the Extraordinary Ambiguity of Art,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 42 (2008): 77.

music, and theatre. Again, for clarity, I will adopt Murdoch's term for the audience or viewer of an artwork: the "client".³

In order to deepen our understanding of Murdoch on the role of art in moral perception I will first outline her view of moral perception generally, before turning to the role that art plays. As such, this thesis will take three parts. First, I will articulate Murdoch's account of moral perception. I will not attempt to defend it in opposition to other theories of morality. My interest is not in whether or not we ought to accept her account of moral perception, rather, assuming for the sake of argument that we can accept it, I then ask what role art is playing in that account. In Chapter Two, I will outline how Murdoch's aesthetics have been interpreted to date, drawing attention to the focus on "great"⁴ art, in particular literature. In Chapter Three, I will adopt a reading of Murdoch, which allows that aesthetics and ethics do not *only* intersect where art occasions moral perception. Here I will discuss the peculiarities of aesthetic vision: what it means to see something *as an artwork*. I argue that aesthetic vision is usefully analogous to moral vision. The conclusion then is that by reflecting on the nature of aesthetic vision, we can work towards a richer conceptual understanding of moral perception.

If we are to do credit to the complexity of Murdoch's aesthetics, we need to understand the role of art as multifaceted. Murdoch holds that art is both practically morally edifying, insofar as it is a vehicle for moral perception, and conceptually useful for helping us think about what moral perception is. In arguing that art can actually help us *achieve* moral perception, Murdoch is asking too much of art. However, I will defend her additional claim that art can improve our conceptual understanding of moral perception. These two interpretations of the role of art in moral perception are not mutually exclusive. As such, in defending art's explanatory role, I am not *rejecting* existing interpretations. However, I will argue that the claim about art as an explanatory analogy is more defensible, albeit less bold, and therefore should not be overlooked. Thus this thesis will attempt to address the overemphasis on art as a vehicle for moral perception by shedding light on its explanatory role. In so doing I hope to work towards a more complex conception, not only of the intersection between ethics and aesthetics in Murdoch, but also of her account of moral perception itself.

³ Iris Murdoch, "Art is the Imitation of Nature," in *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. Peter Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 246.

⁴ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 83.

A reassessment of Murdoch's account of the role of art in moral perception needs to be situated in a broader understanding of what moral perception is, and its moral significance. Later in this thesis, I will outline readings of Murdoch that suggest that looking at great art is an experience of moral perception. I will also discuss how aesthetic vision is analogous with moral vision, such that identifying key features of the way we look at art can help us better understand what it means to perceive something morally. If either of these claims is to bear any moral weight, we need to first ask whether moral perception is a tool, which can be utilised to achieve moral action, or whether moral perception *constitutes* a kind of moral action in itself. When we perceive art morally, are we sharpening our moral tools, or is the moral perception of the artwork *in itself* a moral achievement? In this chapter, I will defend the latter. Therefore, we can understand the following discussion of art's role in moral perception in terms of art's broader moral significance: wherever art occasions moral perception, or improves our moral perceptual capabilities, it constitutes a moral achievement.

In contrast to consequentialist and deontological views of morality, a moral perceptual view argues that an agent's morality is not defined by their adherence to moral rules, or by the consequences of their actions. Rather, "one's moral understanding is directly reflected in what one sees".⁵ In this chapter, I will outline the various roles of moral perception in motivating moral behaviour, and will defend that moral perception can, in some cases, *constitute* moral behaviour. My aim here is not to 'take a side' in the historical debate against deontological and consequentialist views of morality, because I do not attempt to argue for a theory of morality as constituted entirely in moral perceptual capacities. Instead I support the suggestion that moral perception is a *facet* of morality, such that a relevant factor in an agent's ability to behave morally is that she can see the morally salient features in a situation. This does not preclude the moral relevance of, for example, her principles, or the consequences of her actions. This approach allows for a multifaceted view of moral character as constituted in an agent's inner life⁶ (beliefs, values, perceptions), as well as their actions and the consequences of those actions.

⁵ Bridget Clarke, "The Lens of Character: Aristotle, Murdoch and the Idea of Moral Perception," (PhD diss, University of Pittsburgh, 2003) 70.

⁶ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 9.

I.1. Murdoch's Account of Moral Perception

Murdoch suggests that to see morally salient features is to see past the ego or the self. She states, “the enemy of moral life is the fat relentless ego”.⁷ If we take the “ego” here to be referring to self-interest or natural egoism, the argument is that our experience of a reality outside ourselves is almost always distorted and obscured by self-interest. As such, we do not often experience *reality*, rather a “selfish dream life”,⁸ by which “the mind is besieged”.⁹ The task of moral perception, therefore, is to overcome the ego, and see the world as it is. Murdoch’s concept of a transcendent Good¹⁰ refers to this reality outside of ourselves, which is so often obscured by the ego. As such, seeing the world *as it is* equates to seeing the Good.

Given Murdoch’s intensely sceptical view that human experience is removed from reality, it is immensely difficult (if not impossible) to ever achieve a total, accurate vision of reality, entirely unobscured by the ego. I will, therefore, adopt Bridget Clarke’s useful distinction between two ways of envisioning reality as described by Murdoch. There is “total vision”;¹¹ the near unattainable “view of reality as a whole; it is the frame for the picture”,¹² and then “individual vision”,¹³ which is “one’s grasp of particular individuals within the outlook; it is the moment-to-moment picture within the frame”.¹⁴ Individual vision includes contemplation of any “part” of reality, “from twists of paper and blades of grass to foreign languages”.¹⁵ Murdoch suggests that other humans in particular are the most interesting objects of moral perception, being “far more complicated and enigmatic and ambiguous”¹⁶ than other objects of moral concern, such as “languages or mathematical concepts”.¹⁷ I will return to Clarke’s analogy of reality as a framed picture in more detail in the later discussion of the role of art as an analogy to moral perception, but for now it is useful for representing how moral perception can be achieved. Murdoch notes that total vision is not possible, because the world is “filled with more variety and particularity than we can ever fully comprehend”.¹⁸ Therefore, the pursuit of total

⁷ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 51.

⁸ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin Press, 1992), 317.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 91.

¹¹ Clarke, “The Lens of Character: Aristotle, Murdoch and the Idea of Moral Perception,” 71.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Clarke, “The Lens of Character: Aristotle, Murdoch and the Idea of Moral Perception,” 71.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁶ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 89.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

moral vision is constituted in attention to individual details and particulars (especially other people),¹⁹ rather than abstract contemplation of what the total might look like.

Murdoch suggests that moral perception is achieved through a “loving gaze”. She identifies two key features of a loving gaze; detachment²⁰ and imagination.²¹ I will return to a more detailed discussion of what constitutes imagination and detachment in my subsequent discussion of the role of art, but will define them briefly here. Detachment refers to detachment from the ego, and is achieved when we perceive something with attention to its particularity and individual detail in a concerted effort to understand it for its own sake. Detachment, therefore, characterises the selflessness required to achieve moral perception.

In contrast, imagination refers to a reapplication of language as we attempt to understand what we see. This feature acknowledges that a detached gaze should not equate to one from which the self is entirely absent, rather one where the self does not *dominate* or *obscure* vision, by appropriating what it sees to its own interests. Regardless of whatever detachment is achieved, our moral concepts are still irreducibly our own.²² Imagination, therefore “brings out what we could call the engaged or constructive aspect of attention as opposed to its detached aspect”.²³ In my subsequent discussion of the role of art in engaging a loving gaze, I will return to and further clarify both detachment and imagination.

Murdoch characterises moral perception as a just and loving gaze applied to individual particulars, especially other people.²⁴

1.2. Moral Perception as a Means to an End

Moral perception can usefully regulate the application of moral principles. Lawrence Blum distinguishes moral perception and moral judgment on the basis that moral judgment allows for deliberation regarding how moral principles should be applied in a given situation, whereas moral perception allows the agent to recognise that moral principles need to be applied

¹⁹ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 89.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 64.

²¹ *Ibid*, 42.

²² Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 22.

²³ Clarke, “The Lens of Character: Aristotle, Murdoch and the Idea of Moral Perception,” 81.

²⁴ While I acknowledge that this characterisation of moral perception is contentious, a robust defence of it is beyond the scope of this thesis. In later sections of this Chapter, I work through criticisms of Murdoch’s account of a loving gaze as “detached” and “imaginative”. Although I attempt to clarify her account of a loving gaze, I will not defend it against critics who question its practical role, as well as its opposition to existentialism. See Setiya for the challenge that Murdoch’s account of moral perception is “quixotic” (Kieran Setiya, “Murdoch on the Sovereignty of Good,” *Philosopher’s Imprint* 13, no. 9 (May, 2013): 19.), and see Moran for a criticism of Murdoch’s attempts to reject existentialism (Richard Moran, “Iris Murdoch and Existentialism,” In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, edited by Justin Broackes, 181-196. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

in the first place.²⁵ In this sense, moral perception can motivate our application of moral principles. Blum illustrates this point with the example of two people seated on a train, who both see an exhausted-looking woman standing, holding several shopping bags.²⁶ Joan perceives the woman's discomfort, and in the pursuit of minimising that discomfort (which we can take to be a morally 'good' act), she offers the woman her seat. John does not recognise the discomfort. This is not to say that John has poor moral judgment, that he holds different principles to Joan, because we can suppose that if his attention were drawn to the woman's discomfort, he would vacate his seat immediately in a similar attempt to minimise her discomfort. The relevant distinction between the two is that Joan sees the discomfort, and so it is only Joan who has a reason to stand in the first place. It is, therefore, seeing the morally salient features of a situation that provides a reason to act, and moral perception can motivate moral conduct.

The second, stronger claim about moral perception as a means to a moral end, is that it does not motivate the application of moral principles, but that the perception of morally salient features *creates* moral principles. Perceiving morally is not just a process of recognising that a principle needs to be applied, but of actually generating a principle. Murdoch supports this view by arguing that "the necessity of being moved by moral reasons lies not in the nature of the will but in the motivational import of cognition".²⁷ The claim is that we could not perceive a situation morally, and know that it therefore required action, but still be lacking the moral principle to apply. To return to the example on the train, where the relevant moral principle is that minimising discomfort is morally good, the argument is that Joan could not have morally perceived the woman's discomfort, and been at a loss as to whether or not she ought to have minimised it. Seeing the morally salient feature includes seeing the moral principle at stake: "Joan saliently perceives... the woman's good (i.e., her comfort) as at stake in a way that John does not. Joan perceives a morally relevant value at stake, while John does not."²⁸ Again, to distinguish moral perception from moral judgment, moral perception is not just the recognition that a moral principle needs to be applied, but an understanding of what the principle is. A failure of moral perception is then a "failure to see what a circumstance means, in the loaded sense [which entails motivation]".²⁹ To perceive morally is not to recognise that a situation has arisen where a moral principle needs to be applied, and to then select from a range of potentially relevant principles. Rather, it is to simultaneously recognise the relevant principle and the necessity of its application.

²⁵ Lawrence Blum, "Moral Perception and Particularity," *Ethics* 101 no. 4 (July, 1991): 701-702.

²⁶ Blum, "Moral Perception and Particularity," 702.

²⁷ Setiya, "Murdoch on the Sovereignty of Good," 6.

²⁸ Blum, "Moral Perception and Particularity," 703.

²⁹ Setiya, "Murdoch on the Sovereignty of Good," 8.

Perceiving the morally salient features includes seeing how to respond, and being motivated towards that response.³⁰

1.3. Moral Perception as an End in Itself

The claim that moral perception *constitutes* moral behaviour is contingent on the idea that perceiving morally is morally significant *irrespective* of the actions, which that perception motivates. There are two possible constitutive claims to be made here. The weak claim is that “states of mind carry *some* weight”,³¹ but perhaps less than actions. This claim allows for the idea that performing a morally good action *because* you perceived the situation morally is better than performing the same action for different reasons. The strong claim is that states of mind play a “crucial role”³² in determining someone’s moral worthiness.

I will not attempt to defend the strong claim, rather argue that states of mind do carry some weight. Murdoch’s example of the mother-in-law who makes an effort to perceive her daughter-in-law as she really is³³ provides an example to illustrate this case. Murdoch supposes that a mother-in-law, who behaves “beautifully”³⁴ towards her daughter in law, nonetheless privately views her as “a silly vulgar girl”.³⁵ After some internal effort, she comes to see her more accurately as (amongst other things) “not vulgar but refreshingly simple... and so on”.³⁶ I will return to this example in more detail later, when I sketch Murdoch’s characterisation of what achieving moral perception involves. The argument is nonetheless clear, that the mother-in-law is a *better moral agent* after her efforts to perceive the daughter-in-law morally, than she was previously, despite her behaviour having remained constant.

Blum’s example of Joan and John on the train is again useful to illustrate this point. Even if John was prompted to act, and acted perfectly by giving up his seat immediately and without any resentment,³⁷ or even let’s say if he gives up his seat any time he sees someone standing with bags (irrespective of apparent age or discomfort), owing to a habitual attention to rules, he is still morally distinct from Joan. Unlike Joan, he still displays a “deficiency” in the form of “a situational self-absorption or attentional laziness”.³⁸ While this deficiency is *mitigated* by his

³⁰ Blum, “Moral Perception and Particularity,” 712.

³¹ Christopher Mole, “Attention, Self, and *The Sovereignty of Good*,” in *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment* ed. Anne Rowe (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 73.

³² *Ibid*, 74.

³³ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 16.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 17.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

³⁶ *Ibid*.

³⁷ Blum, “Moral Perception and Particularity,” 704.

³⁸ Blum, “Moral Perception and Particularity,” 704.

standing to help the woman, such that his action makes him *better*, he is not Joan's moral *equal* by virtue of the action alone. Therefore, "The moral importance of states of mind is not exhausted by the importance of their effects".³⁹ That is, our moral perceptions are significant in and of themselves, not just in virtue of the actions that they motivate.

1.4 Problems with Murdoch's Account

Murdoch's characterisation of moral perception as a loving gaze opens her account up to criticisms, both about her use of the term *love*, and about where her theory is situated in relation to the views of morality, which she takes herself to be opposing. It seems contradictory for Murdoch to assert that the gaze required for moral perception can be at once loving and detached, given the intuitive implication that love is impassioned. In order to resolve this potential problem, we need a clarification of what she means by *love*. Further, we need to clarify *detached*, and in particular distinguish it from *rational*. Murdoch sets herself up in opposition to traditional rationalist views of morality,⁴⁰ offering a loving gaze as an alternate to the consequentialist and deontological views that centre on a rational agent's decision-making. As Mark Hopwood notes, "Murdoch explicitly and repeatedly *contrasts* the vision that is occasioned by reason and the vision that is occasioned by love."⁴¹ If we cannot, therefore, understand detached in terms other than *unemotional* or *rational*, then Murdoch's insistence that moral perception features detachment risks undermining her starting point. In an attempt to resolve these potential criticisms of her characterisation of a loving gaze, I will address both love and detachment in turn.

1.4.1 A Loving Gaze

In order to clarify what Murdoch means by *loving*, I will adopt Hopwood's characterisation of *love* as *eros* in Murdoch's account. Hopwood defines *eros* as a form of desire with the following necessary conditions; that the desire be directed at a particular object whose value cannot be captured under a closed description,⁴² that it engage the imagination,⁴³ and that it

³⁹ Mole, "Attention, Self, and *The Sovereignty of Good*," 73.

⁴⁰ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 99.

⁴¹ Mark Hopwood, "'The Extremely Difficult Realisation that Something Other Than Oneself is Real': Iris Murdoch on Love and Moral Agency," *European Journal of Philosophy* (July, 2017), 3.

⁴² *Ibid*, 17.

⁴³ Hopwood, "'The Extremely Difficult Realisation that Something Other Than Oneself is Real': Iris Murdoch on Love and Moral Agency," 17.

carry with it a normative demand.⁴⁴ That the object not be under closed description requires that there be no finite list of features rendering the object desirable. To use Hopwood's example, if Juliet feels *eros* towards Romeo, then she might be able to list attributes of his that she likes. However, we cannot assume that she would feel *equally* towards another person bearing all of the same features. That is, "it is understood that the description does not capture the value of the object in the way that a closed description does."⁴⁵ One of the ways that we can distinguish the love to which Murdoch is referring from other kinds of passion is by the condition that it not be under closed description. That is, that our desire is not based on a finite list of desirable qualities. We might still desire the object if some of its qualities changed, or conversely, we might not desire another object with the same features *equally*.

The link between *eros* and the imagination is in the attempt to convey a sense of *eros* to a third party. Hopwood suggests that if we feel *eros* towards an object, for example a painting, and we were attempting to convey our passion to a third party, we might change our description of the painting depending on whom we were talking to in an attempt to inspire an equal passion:

"One day, I go along to an exhibition with an old friend, and as we stand in front of one of the Turner paintings on display, she begins to talk about her response to the work. She talks about the elegance of the composition and the subtlety of the color, but she also talks about how it makes her feel – about how it reminds her of summer days when the two of us used to play in the rain together as children. As we stand there talking about the picture, I begin to see it differently."⁴⁶

The suggestion here is that it takes an imaginative effort to convey *eros*, and that through imaginative stimulation of the hearer, that *eros* can be shared.

Finally, *eros* conveys a normative demand. To say that you love something in this way is to imply that it warrants that judgment; although a subjective statement, a claim of *eros* also makes an objective evaluation. As Hopwood suggests, to feel *eros* towards "a piece of music,"⁴⁷ for example, is "for it to *merit* the pleasure that I take in it".⁴⁸ It is this objective evaluation that is a condition of *eros*, which distinguishes it from other types of desire, such as preference. To say that I prefer one piece of music to another, is to make a subjective claim. However, if I feel *eros* towards one piece of music, then I am making a claim to it being objectively superior: it is not just that I like it more, but also that it is *better*. We can recognise this objective condition if we

⁴⁴ Hopwood, "The Extremely Difficult Realisation that Something Other Than Oneself is Real": Iris Murdoch on Love and Moral Agency," 17.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 15.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 20-21.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 16.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

think of the familiar response to disagreement with our expressions of *eros*. Regarding the Turner painting in the example above, if I felt *eros* towards the painting, I would be outraged or shocked to find that someone else did not agree, in a way that would not seem justified had I just said that I liked it, or that I preferred it to another painting in the gallery. If *eros* were an exclusively subjective assessment, there would be no cause for shock or outrage in discovering that it is not shared by everyone. Therefore, *eros* requires a normative claim, unlike other types of desire.

Taking Hopwood's conception of *eros*, we now need to understand its application to morality. The question is: How can we look at something *morally* in a way that displays *eros*? Hopwood suggests that to have moral *eros* is to love another person or thing in such a way that it is not under closed description; it is to accept their infinite complexity. Here we see how *eros* corresponds with Murdoch's account of what it is to view another morally: "recognizing the existence of other people means not only recognising them as similar to ourselves, but also as indefinitely particular, obscure, and alien".⁴⁹ Hopwood asserts that such a recognition does indeed require both a normative respect for the individuality and "otherness" of the subject, as well as imaginative engagement: "To say that this realisation is 'extremely difficult' is to say that this value is one that cannot be brought under a closed description, but requires an effort of imaginative engagement directed at something existing beyond what I am currently capable of seeing."⁵⁰ Therefore, Hopwood's reading of Murdoch's "loving gaze" as a moral *eros* allows us to understand *love* as more complex than an initial reading might suggest.

Taking *love* to refer to *eros* as characterised by Hopwood, we can now understand *detached*, as referring to the selfless respect for the subject of one's desire as entirely distinct and other, rather than as *emotionless*. Murdoch's account of a loving gaze, therefore, is distinct from rationalist accounts of morality to the extent that it does rely on an emotion (*eros*), rather than on strictly rational decision-making.

1.4.2. *Overcoming the Ego*

Arguably a more pressing problem with Murdoch's account of what moral vision involves is the seeming contradiction of insisting both that the ego be transcended, and that the inner life be given close attention. Murdoch makes the following seemingly contradictory claims; that the ego is the "enemy" of moral life,⁵¹ and that "trying to become good involves giving

⁴⁹ Ruokonen, "Iris Murdoch and the Extraordinary Ambiguity of Art," 83.

⁵⁰ Hopwood, "The Extremely Difficult Realisation that Something Other Than Oneself is Real": Iris Murdoch on Love and Moral Agency," 27.

⁵¹ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 57.

attention to things of moral importance”.⁵² Given that states of mind, and one’s attainment of moral perception play an important moral role (as outlined previously), it follows that our inner life is morally significant. If we accept Murdoch’s claim that states of mind, are morally significant, then we must necessarily attend to them as morally salient features. This would seem to result in a self-directed attention that would render overcoming the ego impossible. The solution is to “reject the idea that the morally important states of mind and character are inner states, and think of them instead as being *world-involving*”.⁵³ States of mind refer to modes of engaging with the world. When we insist that moral perception is morally significant, it is not exclusively to the mind of the agent that we are directing attention, but to the *relation* between the agent and the world outside of them; the extent to which they *mediate* that world through a self-interested, or through a loving gaze. Murdoch highlights that states of mind are world-involving, by making the following etymological observation about the word *attention*: “‘Attention’ comes from the Old French *ad tendere*: being stretched out.)”⁵⁴ The implication, then, is that attending to states of mind involves attending to the extent to which they are world-involving; how they *stretch out* to the reality outside of them.

We can understand Murdoch’s account of moral perception as requiring that we overcome or transcend the ego, in order to attend to something outside of ourselves with *eros*: “a just and loving gaze”.⁵⁵ In the next chapter, I will discuss art’s role in helping us develop a “just and loving gaze,”⁵⁶ and the circumstances in which an artist can render a subject in such a way that it can be morally perceived by its audience.

⁵² Mole, “Attention, Self and *The Sovereignty of Good*,” 72.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 73.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 82.

⁵⁵ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 25.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*.

While Murdoch's discussion of the role of art in moral perception is multifaceted, the focus in the literature to date has overwhelmingly been on the extent to which art can provide an *experience* of moral perception. That is, the ways in which art is a vehicle through which its clients can perceive morally. The main proponents of this view of art as an instance of moral perception are Burns and Gomes, the role of art in moral perception being their exclusive focus, but this discussion will also extend to critics whose focus is on the intersection of philosophy and literature.

In thinking about art as a vehicle for moral perception, Murdoch limits her discussion to "great" or "good" art. For Murdoch, an artwork's greatness is constituted in the extent to which it is a *realistic* portrayal of its subject matter: "it is realism which makes great art great".⁵⁷ "Realism" here is not restricted to mimesis, because Murdoch allows the possibility that non-mimetic arts can achieve greatness,⁵⁸ although I will discuss this possibility in further detail later in this chapter. Murdoch's "realism" is better understood in opposition to fantasy. If the artist perceives of her subject morally, by seeing it as it really is, as opposed to as a distortion by the ego, then she can achieve "good art, not fantasy".⁵⁹ Therefore, in this chapter, I will not use "great" and "good" as subjective assessments of the artwork's aesthetic merit, rather strictly in Murdoch's sense. To say that an artwork is "great" is to indicate that the artist has perceived of her subject morally, and conveyed that moral vision to their client.

Murdoch argues that in the case of great art, the artist's moral perception of the subject matter is duly conveyed to the artwork's client, such that they too can perceive it morally. The most common example is in literature, where characters are rendered with such clarity and peculiarity that the reader (or "client")⁶⁰ comes to view them with a loving gaze:

"Consider what we learn from contemplating the characters of Shakespeare or Tolstoy or the paintings of Velasquez or Titian. What is learnt here is something about the real quality of human nature, when it is envisaged, in the artist's just and compassionate vision, with a clarity which does not belong to the self-centred rush of ordinary life."⁶¹

⁵⁷ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 64.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 84.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 83.

⁶⁰ Murdoch, "Art is the Imitation of Nature," 246.

⁶¹ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 63.

In such circumstances, where the artist has a “just and compassionate vision”⁶² and the capacity to convey it with “clarity”,⁶³ then the client can achieve moral perception while engaging with the artwork, because they perceive its subject matter morally.

In this chapter, I will detail how art can be understood as an instance of moral perception. I will outline how the artist comes to have a moral perception of her subject matter. While we can accept that an artist might be capable, with careful and devoted attention, of perceiving their subject morally, we need a clearer understanding of the requisite “clarity”⁶⁴ if we are to understand how that perception might be conveyed. As such, I will follow my outline of the artist’s moral vision with a discussion of how that vision is acquired by clients of the artwork. I will then conclude by detailing the limitations of this account, and suggest that we should not commit ourselves to a view of art as occasioning moral perception, until we can better delineate the conditions under which it does so.

II.1. Artist’s Vision: A Loving Gaze

Artists, by setting aside their personal fantasies in pursuit of a realistic vision of their subject matter, can achieve moral perception. Burns characterises the artist’s moral perception of their subject matter as “an analogue for the way in which we should try to perceive our world”.⁶⁵ In the following chapter, I will discuss how artists’ attempt at moral vision is an illuminating analogue, *regardless* of whether or not they actually achieve moral perception. However, the focus in discussions of Murdoch to date has overwhelmingly been on instances where artists *do* achieve moral vision. Murdoch supposes that in overcoming personal fantasies, as well as refusing to “indulge the fantasy life of his client,”⁶⁶ the artist exhibits a loving gaze:

“The great artist sees his objects... in a light of justice and mercy. The direction of his attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from self which reduces all to a false unity, towards the great surprising variety of the world, and the ability so to direct attention is love.”⁶⁷

⁶² Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 63.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Burns, “Images of Reality: Iris Murdoch’s Five Ways from Art to Religion,” *Religions* 6 (2015): 880.

⁶⁶ Scott Dunbar, “On Art, Morals and Religion: Some Reflections on the Work of Iris Murdoch,” *Religious Studies* 14, no. 4, (December, 1978): 522.

⁶⁷ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 65.

Ana Eugen Lita observes that this loving gaze is particularly applicable to literature, when the “writer’s sensibility disrupts the natural selfishness of human beings.”⁶⁸ She further articulates this sensibility as defined by the novelist’s “*toleran[ce]* in his endeavor to display a real apprehension of persons whose existence is separate from himself and crucially important and interesting to themselves”.⁶⁹ On this view, representing their subject matter truthfully requires that artists overcome their natural egoism, and ensure the work is not a product of their personal fantasies. Hence Burns claims that the artist’s moral vision plays a role as an explanatory analogue to illuminate the unselfish attention required of moral perception.⁷⁰ Burns is also interested in the way the artist’s moral vision can be *shared* with the artwork’s clients, such that they too can achieve moral perception. It is to this further role of art as a vehicle through which not only artists, but also clients, can achieve moral perception that I will now turn.

II.2. *Thick Concepts: Interweaving of Ethics & Aesthetics*

Murdoch’s claim that clients can acquire the artist’s moral perception through the artwork rests on her interweaving of the ethical and aesthetic, and her use of “thick concepts”.⁷¹ Murdoch suggests that the ethical and the aesthetic are linked, such that the beautiful is synonymous with the Good.⁷² A beautiful or “great” artwork, therefore, will display something of the Good (the “good” here referring to the morally perceived subject matter). Gomes articulates this conceptual link between the beautiful and the Good in terms of “thick concepts”.⁷³ Thick concepts are descriptions, which also make a value judgment. The value judgment is built into the description, so to describe the thing is *necessarily* to make a judgment about it. Such descriptions are world-involving: “it is the world itself which determines which thick concept is appropriate, and in so doing it can fix the evaluative attitude we should hold towards it”.⁷⁴ Gomes uses *elegant* as an example. Describing something as elegant is both a description of what it is *like*, as well as an endorsement, insofar as we can accept that *elegant* is positive. To describe something as elegant, you must not only recognise that it is elegant, but further, recognise what elegance *is* and its normative weight. “Perceiving elegance requires the capacity to recognize things as elegant and this, in turn, requires an understanding of the

⁶⁸ Ana Lita, “Iris Murdoch’s Criticism of Traditional Views of the Moral Self: An Alternate Account of “seeing” the Others,” *Labyrinth* 16, no. 2 (Winter, 2014): 111.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁰ Burns, “Images of Reality: Iris Murdoch’s Five Ways from Art to Religion,” 880.

⁷¹ Anil Gomes, “Iris Murdoch on Art, Ethics, and Attention,” *British Journal of Ethics* 53, no. 3 (2013): 322.

⁷² Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 40.

⁷³ Gomes, “Iris Murdoch on Art, Ethics, and Attention,” 322.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

evaluative point of view which groups together things as elegant”.⁷⁵ Thick concepts, therefore, can be understood as concepts with a “failure of bifurcation”⁷⁶ between the descriptive and evaluative (or normative) judgments.

There are two conditions under which thick concepts can be used; if either you “grasp”⁷⁷ the concept, or if you “possess”⁷⁸ it. To “grasp” a thick concept, you need to understand the “normative element”:⁷⁹ “without grasp of this normative component, she will not be able to fix the reference of the concept and, in particular, will not be able to continue applying the concept to new cases”.⁸⁰ In contrast, to “possess” a thick concept, one needs to “endorse those values as one’s own”.⁸¹ Gomes again turns to *elegant* as an example to distinguish the two. She suggests that traditional uses of *elegant* in literature may have been inherently gendered, such that elegant was associated with femininity. Gomes suggests, “A reader of Austen may grasp the concept sufficiently to understand her applications while dissenting from the beliefs and values which make difficult the instantiation of elegance by men.”⁸² To possess Austen’s concept of *elegance*, in such a way that it could only be applied to the feminine, would be to endorse the gender norms that substantiate such a concept. We can, however, grasp the concept, while rejecting those norms, although we will be restricted from using *elegant* as Austen does. “Without some grasp of the concept’s evaluative frame, a subject would not be able to recognize items as displaying elegance”.⁸³ As such, without endorsing the values that underpin Austen’s use of elegant, we might understand what she means when she describes an object in such a way, without independently identifying as *elegant* everything, which she would. Understanding the normative element allows us to grasp a thick concept, while endorsing that element constitutes possession of the concept.

Gomes argues that thick concepts are relevant to Murdoch insofar as she perceives the aesthetic and the ethical as interwoven. Beauty, for Murdoch, is a thick concept, the normative element of which rests on an understanding of the Good. As Murdoch states, “goodness and beauty are not to be contrasted but are largely part of the same structure.”⁸⁴ Gomes suggests that there is evidence of the extent to which aesthetic descriptions are thick concepts, indicating moral values, in our everyday use of aesthetic and moral language:

⁷⁵ Gomes, “Iris Murdoch on Art, Ethics, and Attention,” 328.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 323.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid, 324.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid, 328.

⁸⁴ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 40.

“A painting can be honest, a novel can be brave, and a piece of music may display integrity. Correlatively, some of our terms of ethical evaluation have distinct aesthetic overtones: people and actions can be fine, pure, rotten, or tarnished.”⁸⁵

According to Gomes, this use of language evidences that ethics and aesthetics share a common “evaluative framework”.⁸⁶ “Evaluative framework” here refers to the commonalities between multiple evaluative concepts within thick concepts. For example, the religious concepts of *blasphemy*, *chastity*, and *original sin*⁸⁷ all draw on the same evaluative framework, just as *elegance*, *delicacy*, and *wit* all draw on the same aesthetic framework. Therefore, we can understand Murdoch’s claim that the beautiful and good are “part of the same structure”⁸⁸ as suggesting that the framework of our aesthetic and moral concepts overlap. For Gomes, to say that they overlap is not to say that they are coterminous, rather that the values underpinning what is moral and what is beautiful are not entirely distinct: “The difference between aesthetic and ethical values is one of degree and not kind: aesthetic and ethical values lie on a spectrum”.⁸⁹ The conclusion then is that beauty in an artwork is on the same “spectrum” as the Good.

If we can accept Murdoch’s claim that the beautiful and the Good are part of the same structure, then wherever an artwork is beautiful, it reveals something of the Good. Although I will challenge that the beautiful and good are as interwoven as Murdoch asserts, for now I will explore the two ways in which a beautiful artwork can contribute to our understanding of the Good; that is, two ways in which a beautiful artwork conveys the artist’s moral perception of their subject matter.

II.3. Attending to Beauty: Acquiring Artist’s Moral Vision

If we are to accept the claim that beauty and good are “part of the same structure”,⁹⁰ we need to start with a clearer understanding of what Murdoch defines as *beauty*. Here I will not attempt to engage in the vast debate in aesthetics surrounding the definition of beauty, or its intersection with truth and good. Rather I will articulate the close relation between beauty, truth and the Good on Murdoch’s account, so that we can better understand what she means by *beauty*. Beauty to Murdoch is perhaps most clearly articulated by contrast with “fantasy”.⁹¹

⁸⁵ Gomes, “Iris Murdoch on Art, Ethics, and Attention,” 325.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 326.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*.

⁸⁸ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 40.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 63.

Murdoch defines 'bad art' as "fantasy";⁹² where good art is a "vision of reality".⁹³ She states, "we can see in mediocre art, where perhaps it is even more clearly seen than in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of self, the dimming of any reflection of the real world".⁹⁴ *Fantasy*, therefore, is art, which is not a product of the artist's moral vision, rather of their adherence to their own egoistic illusions, or those of their clients. Conversely, beauty for Murdoch is inseparable from truth: beauty constitutes "a truthful image of the human condition".⁹⁵ Although we need not accept that moral perception on behalf of the artist is both a necessary *and* sufficient condition for an artwork to achieve beauty, we can accept that it is necessary on Murdoch's account, such that an artwork would descend into fantasy without it.

Given the interweaving of ethical and aesthetic concepts, a beautiful artwork will reveal to its client the artist's conception of the Good; their moral perception of the subject matter. Murdoch, therefore, suggests that by attending to great or beautiful art, we can learn about that which is depicted, because it offers "a juster, clearer, more detailed, more refined understanding of human nature, or of the natural world, which crowds upon our senses".⁹⁶ By engaging with the beauty in great art, we can also learn something about the moral framework with which it overlaps, and so acquire the artist's moral vision. For example, if we take compassion to be a thick concept, then in the artist's compassionate rendering of their characters, we can learn something, both about the characters, and the nature of compassion itself. Diamond uses Dickens as an example of such an artist:⁹⁷

"The attention which we see directed towards the lives and thoughts of children has a characteristic emotional colour, the result of its combining great warmth, concentration of energy and humour ... Where he is successful, the description is not just enjoyable but can contribute to our lasting sense of human life, of what is interesting and important."⁹⁸

Murdoch reiterates Diamond's claim about literature, when she states, "the study of good literature, or of any good art, enlarges and refines our understanding of truth".⁹⁹ If the artist has achieved moral perception in relation to their subject matter, and rendered it beautifully, then they allow their clients the opportunity to experience¹⁰⁰ that moral vision, and learn from it.

⁹² Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 63.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹⁶ Iris Murdoch, "Ethics and the Imagination," *The Irish Theological Quarterly* 52 (1986): 90.

⁹⁷ Craig Taylor, "Literature and Moral Thought," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 54, no. 3 (2014): 286.

⁹⁸ Cora Diamond, "Anything but Argument?" in *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 299.

⁹⁹ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 86.

¹⁰⁰ Underwood, *The Experience of Beauty: Seven Essays and a Dialogue* (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 2012), 112.

II.4. Co-attending to Artwork: Acquiring Co-attender's Thick Concepts

Gomes attests to a further role of art, even where we cannot share the artist's moral perception. In such instances, perhaps where we cannot recognise an element of the Good in an artwork (perhaps we do not find it beautiful, or we miss some potentially appealing aspect of it when we initially attend), we can nonetheless develop our conception of the Good, and work towards moral perception by co-attending. By co-attending, and attempting to describe to another what we see in an artwork, even if we do not acquire moral vision, we can nonetheless learn something of our co-attender's vision, and in so doing develop our understanding of their moral concepts.

The moral framework, or vision of a co-attender can be discovered in the act of co-attending to an artwork. Murdoch allows that learning about certain thick concepts "takes place in the context of particular acts of attention".¹⁰¹ Gomes suggests that co-attention to art is one such act: "joint attention expands our grasp of aesthetic concepts".¹⁰² Murdoch explicitly endorses the moral value of joint attention: "Progress in understanding a scheme of concepts often takes place as we listen to normative-descriptive talk in the presence of a common object."¹⁰³ We can imagine a docent taking a group of school children around an art gallery, and that as the art is described to the children, they learn something not only about the works, but also about *how to look* at art more generally. However, mutual influence and understanding can arise out of any exercise in joint attention; it need not rest on an imbalance. For example, an art critic and novice, or two novices could each learn something of the other's way of seeing. Joint attention allows us to perceive an artwork through our co-attender's eyes.

Having accepted Murdoch's claim about the thickness of ethical and aesthetic concepts, the outcome of joint attention is that, by coming to understand another's vision of an artwork, we can adopt their aesthetic vision. To the extent that the aesthetic and ethical are interwoven, then acquiring their aesthetic vision also constitutes having a deeper understanding of their moral vision. Co-attending offers "partial entry into the evaluative point of view from which ethical qualities are identified."¹⁰⁴ Gomes's claim is not that joint attention is necessary, rather that it is "a central part of our standard grasp of these concepts,"¹⁰⁵ and consequently about the ethical frameworks that underpin their ways of looking. It is worth noting, however, that acquiring a deeper understanding of the ethical concepts of our co-attender is not "immediate or

¹⁰¹ Gomes, "Iris Murdoch on Art, Ethics, and Attention," 330.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 31.

¹⁰⁴ Gomes, "Iris Murdoch on Art, Ethics, and Attention," 331.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

easy”,¹⁰⁶ rather “the point is only that entry into another’s aesthetic conceptual scheme makes such ethical understanding possible: in coming to understand another’s art, one becomes disposed to understand her ethics.”¹⁰⁷ Hopwood provides a vivid example of the edifying force of joint attention:

“If you and I are having a discussion of a painting in a gallery, and I think that you are not quite appreciating it in the way that it deserves, then I may attempt to come up with a description of what is beautiful about it that will help you to engage with it in a different way. For example, I might tell you to look at the way the light is dancing, or the way in which the depth of the blue almost seems to draw you into the picture. Such descriptions are best understood as imaginative attempts to help you to meet the normative demand that I take the beauty of the painting to impose, by bringing your desires and affective responses into closer correspondence with that beauty.”¹⁰⁸

As such, the claim is not so broad as to suggest that every time we co-attend to an artwork, we will acquire our co-attender’s concepts, rather that co-attention gives us the opportunity to do so.

II.5. Problems with this Account

Although Murdoch clearly states that the artist’s vision of their subject matter is a “fundamental case of moral seeing”,¹⁰⁹ engagement with her aesthetics has not been limited to this role. As Burns and Gomes evidence, the focus has been on the extent to which the artist is able to *convey* this moral vision to the client, such that they too can achieve moral perception. The interest in art as potentially morally edifying is not at the point where the artist is moral in relation to her subject matter, rather in whether art can have an edifying influence on its *clients*; whether it can play a role as a vehicle for moral perception. This account rests on two assumptions. The first is that the ethical and aesthetic are interwoven, such that beauty and the Good are part of the same structure. The second is that if an artwork is beautiful, its client can learn about the Good. I will critique each of these assumptions in turn to challenge Murdoch and her supporters in their claim that art is a vehicle for moral perception.

¹⁰⁶ “Iris Murdoch on Art, Ethics, and Attention,” 332.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Hopwood, ““The Extremely Difficult Realization That Something Other Than Oneself Is Real”: Iris Murdoch on Love and Moral Agency,” 17.

¹⁰⁹ Lita, “Iris Murdoch’s Criticism of Traditional Views of the Moral Self: An Alternate Account of “seeing” the Others,” 111.

II.5.1. *Interweaving Ethical and Aesthetic*

Murdoch's central claim that beauty and goodness are thick concepts, such that they are "part of the same structure"¹¹⁰ is refutable by counter example. If it were the case that aesthetic and ethical concepts were interwoven, then those with a sound understanding of aesthetic concepts would arguably be more moral. As Peter Goldie states, "if someone is an honest person, we would expect him to be honest in his intellectual or artistic activity as well as in his ethical dealings with other people."¹¹¹ However, this conclusion seems at odds with our experiences, given that those who have a particular talent for art, or are experienced critics, are not overwhelmingly more ethical, or at least do not appear to be obviously so. When we say of someone that they "know a lot about art" it is rarely interpreted as a testament to their moral character. There appears to be no striking correlation between grasping aesthetic and moral concepts, given that "we know perfectly well that good people can be blind to art; and we know too that bad or profoundly selfish people can be great artists, or critics of superb judgment and taste".¹¹² Our experience of those with understanding and experience in art is inconsistent with the claim that ethical and aesthetic concepts are interwoven.

Murdoch acknowledges that claims about the thickness of aesthetic and ethical concepts are counterintuitive. She allows that, "Good artists can be bad men; the virtue may... reside entirely in the work, the just vision be attainable only there."¹¹³ However, while acknowledging that beauty and goodness do not intuitively appear related, Murdoch also suggests that they in fact *are*:

"The good artist is not necessarily wise at home, and the concentration guard can be a kindly father. At least this can seem to be so, though I would feel that the artist had at least got a starting-point and that on closer inspection the concentration camp guard might prove to have his limitations as a father."¹¹⁴

What Murdoch is referring to by "got a starting-point"¹¹⁵ is difficult to deduce. Perhaps a defense of the thickness of aesthetic and ethical concepts might rest on the conditions under which one can "grasp" such concepts. Murdoch might argue that the selfish art critic has only superficially "grasped" aesthetic concepts, which would account for an incomplete grasp of ethical concepts.

¹¹⁰ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 40.

¹¹¹ Peter Goldie, "Virtues of Art and Human Well-Being," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 82 (2008), 189.

¹¹² Peter Goldie, "Towards a Virtue Theory of Art", *British Journal of Aesthetics* 47 (2007): 384.

¹¹³ Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 84.

¹¹⁴ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 94.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

However, without a more rigorous analysis of the conditions of understanding an ethical concept, it is difficult to accept that beauty and goodness are as interwoven as Murdoch attests.

Further, accepting the interweaving of aesthetic and ethical concepts commits us to a view of art that is vulnerable to challenges of elitism. If it is the case that beauty and good are part of the same structure, such that by engaging with beautiful art we can acquire concepts of the Good, then we can equate exposure to art with moral education. The intuitively problematic conclusion then arises that those who have not been privileged enough to have an artistic education are somehow morally impoverished, or conversely, that those who have had more exposure to “great”¹¹⁶ art are morally advantaged.

II.5.2. Beauty in Art

Even if a conception of the thickness of aesthetic and ethical concepts could be defended, it is still unclear under what conditions art can display beauty, and by extension, the Good. Murdoch identifies a necessary condition for an artwork to be beautiful: that an artist perceive of their subject morally. However, it is not clear that this is sufficient. An artist must also have the requisite skill to then convey that vision in any given form with “clarity”.¹¹⁷ *Clarity* here refers to the extent to which the artist’s moral vision is made apparent in the artwork; whether the artwork’s client can *acquire* the artist’s vision through the work. There are two problems with an account of beauty that relies on the artist’s clarity of representation. The first is with the scope and application of “clarity” across many art forms, and the second is with the openness of artworks to interpretation.

II.5.2.a. Beauty in Various Art Forms

Given the vast range of form and subject matter in art, it is difficult to attempt to discern whether clarity of representation has been achieved, except on a case-by-case basis. If we understand moral perception to be overcoming the ego and seeing the object of one’s attention *as it is*, it is unclear what moral perception in non-mimetic, or non-representational art might look like. If it is not immediately obvious to the artwork’s client *what* is being represented, then it is difficult to discern whether the artwork is an instance of fantasy. That is, if we do not know what the artist is looking at, how can we speak to whether they have perceived it morally? A

¹¹⁶ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 83.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 63.

minimalist cube, for example, does not have an immediately obvious subject matter. Similarly, it is difficult to discern what a symphony is *about*, and by extension, difficult to identify whether it has represented its subject with clarity. Conversely, Murdoch's emphasis on clarity raises questions about the role of mimetic arts, such as photography.¹¹⁸ A possible conclusion from reading Murdoch would be that photography, by virtue of the visual accuracy with which it can represent its subject, is a paradigmatic case of an artist's unselfish vision conveyed with clarity. Murdoch, however, offers no commentary on photographic arts, so it is a topic that warrants further discussion. Murdoch's emphasis on *clarity* is perhaps also one reason for the literary emphasis in many readings of Murdoch's aesthetics. A novel has characters, and so the artist's vision of their subject matter includes a moral perception *of other people*, who Murdoch takes to be the most "interesting"¹¹⁹ object of our attention. If it is the case that art's ability to occasion moral perception can be achieved more broadly than just in representational art, we would need to work towards a deeper understanding of the distinction between clarity and fantasy, and its application across various art forms.

Although the preference in discussions of Murdoch has been to focus on literature, as a paradigmatic case of clarity of subject matter, Murdoch does allow for the possibility of clarity in non-mimetic art forms. Heather Widdows suggests that "There is no use in even attempting to apply Murdoch's ideas to abstract painting or to music, and, wisely, she is silent on these topics."¹²⁰ Murdoch certainly favours "representational arts",¹²¹ which she sees as "more evidently hold[ing] the mirror up to nature,"¹²² however we can see in her discussion of "structuralist"¹²³ art that there is scope for her theory to apply more widely. Murdoch takes examples where "The object is not 'pictured', it is, just as itself, presented: the kettle, the chair, the Coca-Cola can, the pile of bricks..."¹²⁴ Here, given that the object is not "pictured", Murdoch concludes that the work is not *about* the object, rather about art itself. For example, Murdoch understands "a pile of bricks" not as a study of bricks and an attempt to represent them truthfully, rather as a meditation on what art is: "The subject matter of art is then the nature of the process itself".¹²⁵ We cannot, therefore, read Murdoch's emphasis on representational art as *precluding* the possibility of non-representational art rendering its subject matter with clarity.

¹¹⁸ Burns, "Images of Reality: Iris Murdoch's Five Ways from Art to Religion", 881.

¹¹⁹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 257.

¹²⁰ Heather Widdows, *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 136.

¹²¹ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 84.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 7.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

Murdoch's use of exclusively Western art in her examples poses a further problem here. The examples of novels and paintings to which Murdoch so readily turns are all canonical works in Western art. It is not clear whether there is room in Murdoch's discussion for different cultures' artistic practices, especially where they are non-mimetic, for example in performance art, or body art. If an artwork is non-mimetic, it is more difficult to discern what is being represented, and by extension, whether it is represented with clarity. Even allowing that non-mimetic works, such as structuralist art, can be *about* "the nature of the process itself"¹²⁶ is still limiting, given that Murdoch's account of "the process" of art speaks exclusively to the Western tradition. If we insist on holding onto a view of beauty and goodness as "part of the same structure",¹²⁷ our account of Murdoch's aesthetics needs to *make room* for non-Western art practices in an effort to avoid the problematic conclusion that Western art is morally superior.

Even if we can accept that it is possible on Murdoch's view for a non-mimetic art to achieve clarity, we must query whether her notion of beauty would extend to political art. Murdoch expresses a wariness of art as a vehicle for social commentary, and suggests that manipulating forms for the purpose of conveying a political message can compromise an artwork's clarity. Art is, therefore, precluded from beauty if it is in service to a political agenda, which Murdoch takes to be a kind of fantasy.¹²⁸ She disputes that artists have a social duty: "the artist's duty is to art, to truth-telling in his own medium, the writer's duty is to produce the best literary work of which he is capable".¹²⁹ She does not preclude the possibility that good art can also "serve" society, in fact she states that, "the service to society will no doubt appear then also as an extra or a by-product."¹³⁰ Murdoch here seems to too readily discount the possibility that political art might raise awareness or gain support for a morally relevant social issue, despite not being beautiful. In fact, some artworks might draw attention to morally relevant issues precisely *because* they are not beautiful, for example, where they shock or repulse their client. While Murdoch's suggestion that beautiful art has the potential to reveal truths to its client is appealing, we ought to query whether beauty is *necessary*. A narrower claim is perhaps preferable; that beauty is *sufficient* to improve the clients' moral perception of the art's subject matter, but that there is also scope for non-beautiful art to also have a morally edifying influence on its client. Insisting that an artwork must be *beautiful* further narrows the scope of art that meets her criteria for greatness, and thereby limits the instances where art can act as a vehicle for moral perception.

¹²⁶ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 6.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 40.

¹²⁸ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 17.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 18.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 249.

II.5.2.b. *Problem of Interpretation*

Accepting that at least some art forms are capable of displaying an artist's moral vision with clarity, there remains a problem regarding whether or not the client will be able to identify the moral vision in the work. Murdoch suggests that even art, which is "great"¹³¹ and beautiful can nonetheless be interpreted as fantasy in the wrong hands: "even great art cannot guarantee the quality of its consumer's consciousness."¹³² Murdoch allows, therefore, that art, which displays the artist's moral vision with clarity, will not necessarily do so unequivocally; a concern which is reiterated by Burns.¹³³ We can imagine the same novel being perceived differently by different readers. The schoolboy might find *Lady Chatterley's Lover* more pornographic than the literature critic would. In order to discern whether or not an artwork will allow its client to perceive the subject matter of the work morally, we need to ascertain not only whether the artist has achieved moral vision, and conveyed it with clarity, but also the nature of the client's attention. To this end, further discussion of the most morally edifying way to attend to a work of art is warranted, if we are to have a better understanding of art's role in moral perception.

Even if we can accept that beauty and goodness are thick concepts, and that they can be rendered with clarity across multiple art forms, it is still the case that that clarity might be lost on the artwork's client. As such, even a generous reading of Murdoch on the interweaving of ethical and aesthetic concepts still only allows for rare instances of moral perception. Art that occasions moral perception requires not only a high standard of quality, but also relies on the attention of its client. If this were an exhaustive reading of Murdoch's aesthetics then we would be left with a picture of art as playing a limited role in moral perception, insofar as it offers in rare instances moral perception of its subject matter. Although Murdoch does attest that art that occasions moral perception is indeed rare, she also speaks to a broader and wider reaching role that art can play. It is to this reading that I will turn in the next section, where I argue that even where art cannot bring us to actually perceive its subject morally, it can nonetheless play an important explanatory role in delineating what moral perception *is*.

¹³¹ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 83.

¹³² Maria Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 137.

¹³³ Burns, "Images of Reality: Iris Murdoch's Five Ways from Art to Religion," 884.

Murdoch's discussion of the role of art in moral perception is multifaceted, and does not restrict itself to the claim that art is a vehicle through which its clients can achieve moral perception. While Murdoch does make the bold claim that art can be edifying to the extent that it actually *occasions* moral perception, she also makes the subtler, less contentious claim that art is useful for *understanding* moral perception. For the reasons outlined in the previous chapter, it is only in very rare circumstances that art can achieve the ambitious goal of providing its client with an experience of moral perception, and even then the view struggles to defend itself against charges of elitism. However, this is not the totality of Murdoch's account of the role of art in moral perception, and in the pursuit of doing full credit to her complexity, we must look to additional readings.

Art can play an important theoretical role insofar as it helps us answer the question: What is moral perception like? Given Murdoch's insistence that moral perception is challenging,¹³⁴ we must assume that instances of it are rare. As such, it is unlikely that we would each have vast experience with moral perception in our own life. It is useful, then, to have an analogy to turn to, when theorising about the nature of moral perception. If we cannot draw on our own experience of moral perception, we can at least learn from more commonplace experiences, such as instances of aesthetic vision, insofar as they share the same features. Art, therefore, is not only an *instance* of moral perception, but also an important *analogue*.

Aesthetic perception is usefully analogous to moral vision, both in the artist's struggle to render her subject with clarity, and in the client's loving gaze on the artwork. As previously outlined, the literature on Murdoch's aesthetics mostly concerns great art as a vehicle for moral perception. In Burns's "Five ways from Art to Religion" only one of the five deals with aesthetic vision as an analogue, rather than an *instance* of moral perception.¹³⁵ Even then it is not where the emphasis is placed, nor is it explored in great detail. Discussions of art's theoretical role in moral perception are limited to Marije Altorf, Maria Antonaccio and Ana Lita. Altorf and Antonaccio's focus is on the artist's vision of their subject matter. Their suggestion is that even where the artist does not actually render their subject matter with clarity, their struggle to do so is nonetheless analogous to the struggle to morally perceive another person. Contemplating the similarities with the artist's attempt to fit their subject matter to an artistic form thus illuminates the challenge of maintaining a loving gaze that is at once imaginative and detached. Lita's focus

¹³⁴ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 38.

¹³⁵ Burns, "Images of Reality: Iris Murdoch's Five Ways from Art to Religion," 875.

is not on the artist's vision of their subject matter, rather on the client's perception of the artwork. She argues that perceiving an artwork requires imagination and detachment. As such, aesthetic perception "can be an exercise in moral education: it develops in the subject a capacity for looking at things in a certain way – a capacity which has an important analogue in the sphere of moral epistemology".¹³⁶ This perception is "a fundamental case of moral seeing. The resulting close analogy between one paradigmatic case of moral regard and the more common examples of such a regard is instructive."¹³⁷ In this chapter, I will address both the artist, and client's aesthetic vision in turn; that is, the artist's vision of their subject, and the client's vision of the artwork. In each case, I will identify similarities between moral and aesthetic vision, and discuss how these similarities lead us to a deeper understanding of moral perception.

III.1. Artist's Vision of Subject Matter

In the previous chapter, I discussed the artist's vision of their subject matter at length. The argument being that if an artist achieves moral perception of their subject matter, they can then convey that vision to the client, such that looking at the artwork offers an experience of moral perception. The concern, therefore, was with the extent to which we can *acquire* an artist's moral perception by looking at their art. Antonaccio's focus, however, is not on the circumstances under which art can provide us with an experience of moral perception. Rather her concern is with the way in which the artist's struggle to convey their vision with clarity is analogous with moral perception. As such, art's role in moral perception is not restricted to instances where an artist actually achieves moral vision, and conveys it with clarity. We can also learn more about the challenges of moral perception generally, by thinking about the nature of artistic vision.

The artist's challenge is to achieve clarity, as opposed to fantasy, in their vision and rendering of their subject matter. In the previous chapter, we accepted that it was conceivable that an artist could achieve moral perception in relation to their subject matter, and that they could come to perceive it with a loving gaze. What Floora Ruokonen identifies is the *challenge* of conveying this gaze using form, given that moral perception of another human requires an acceptance of the unknowable¹³⁸ depth of their particularity. That is, to perceive someone

¹³⁶ Gomes, "Iris Murdoch on Art, Ethics and Attention," 333.

¹³⁷ Lita, "Iris Murdoch's Criticism of Traditional Views of the Moral Self: An Alternate Account of "seeing" the Others," 101.

¹³⁸ Ruokonen, "Iris Murdoch and the Extraordinary Ambiguity of Art," 83.

morally is to respect them as infinitely complex, and beyond our total comprehension.¹³⁹ She argues that artworks are incapable of conveying a sense of infinite complexity; they are necessarily finite by virtue of their form. A novel necessarily has a beginning, middle and end, a painting is confined to the canvas, and even with less conventional art forms, such as performance art, there must be a point at which the performance begins and ends. An artwork “has got to have form”,¹⁴⁰ and as such it is necessarily *finite*. Therefore, art often tends towards fantasy or consolation, insofar as it “changes into a more or less unified whole the contingent and formless reality it is supposed to represent”.¹⁴¹ Ruokonen’s concern is that it is only in very rare instances that artists can in fact manipulate form to showcase their respect for the infinite and unknowable particulars of their subject matter:

“The vision of an individual offered by literature could be compared to a framed glimpse of a huge landscape. The framing might be uniquely revealing and, as such, rewarding. However, truthful vision of an individual is also an experience of being lost in boundless space.”¹⁴²

Form, therefore, conceals a vision of reality as infinitely complex: an experience of “boundless space”.¹⁴³ Thus the challenge for the artist posed by form is that it is paradoxically¹⁴⁴ both necessary to convey their vision, and instrumental in obscuring it.

Antonaccio claims that the challenge of individuals in achieving moral perception mirrors this struggle posed by form in art. The analogue here arises from the fact that that consciousness, like an artwork, requires form. She suggests that language is the essential formal feature by which we think about and perceive the world:¹⁴⁵ it mediates our consciousness and our moral vision. We naturally apply language egoistically, obscuring our vision of reality, by describing it such that it fits our selfish fantasies. As Antonaccio states, “human beings are immersed in language and construct unifying narratives to make sense of their lives”.¹⁴⁶ Antonaccio claims, therefore, that we can undo this obfuscating work of the ego and transcend selfish concerns by *redescribing* what we see: “Given the linguistically mediated nature of consciousness, the moral life involves the constant scrutiny of the forms in which consciousness

¹³⁹ Ruokonen, “Iris Murdoch and the Extraordinary Ambiguity of Art,” 83.

¹⁴⁰ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 285.

¹⁴¹ Ruokonen, “Iris Murdoch and the Extraordinary Ambiguity of Art,” 87.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Antonaccio, “Form and Contingency in Iris Murdoch’s Ethics,” 121.

¹⁴⁵ Maria Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 81.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

pictures reality to suit its own egoistic purposes.”¹⁴⁷ Murdoch also affirms Antonaccio’s suggestion that consciousness is mediated by language:

“Words constitute the ultimate texture and stuff of our moral being, since they are the most refined and delicate and detailed, as well as the most universally used and understood, of the symbolisms whereby we express ourselves into existence.”¹⁴⁸

Recalling Murdoch’s famous example of the mother-in-law (M) attempting to perceive of her daughter-in-law (D) morally, we can understand her efforts as a redescription. The “texture” of her “moral being”¹⁴⁹ changed as she acquired a new perception of D as, for example, “fresh” rather than “common”.¹⁵⁰ This honing of M’s perception can be accounted for “in terms of the different descriptive accounts that M gives before and after deliberation”.¹⁵¹ That is to say, that the work of moral perception took place as an exercise in the imaginative reapplication of terms. For M, “to look again”¹⁵² was to describe differently. As such, although Murdoch admits that “moral vision is acquired in a social and linguistic context shared with others”,¹⁵³ she also acknowledges that “it is always mediated through the consciousness of an individual and his or her unique grasp of language.”¹⁵⁴ Clarifying or changing our perceptions is a task of applying and reapplying language as we try to counter the fantasy-generating efforts of our natural egoism: “language [is] the property of individuals who use it as the instrument of their own moral vision.”¹⁵⁵

Just as artists struggle to achieve clarity using the instruments of their respective medium, individuals seeking to perceive others morally will struggle with their instrument: language. Like art, consciousness also requires form. Just as form in art moves away from reality towards fantasy, language can shape our perception in egoistic ways. Antonaccio identifies this challenge of form in art, using the example of literature, where a novel’s challenge is to “maintain the tension between the imaginative uses of literary form and the sense of a reality that lies outside it”.¹⁵⁶ As such, aesthetic and moral visions are “two aspects of a single struggle”.¹⁵⁷ If we want to better understand the challenge of moral perception, we need only think of an artist facing an analogous problem. If we can conceptualise the difficulty for an artist to convey the infinite

¹⁴⁷ Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch*, 81.

¹⁴⁸ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 241.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 17.

¹⁵¹ Carla Bagnoli, “The Exploration of Moral Life,” in *Iris Murdoch: Philosopher* ed. by Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 207.

¹⁵² Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 17.

¹⁵³ Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch*, 87.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 87.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 94.

¹⁵⁷ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 39-40.

complexity of her subject matter, within the necessarily finite restrictions of her form, then we can begin to understand the difficulty of reapplying language in a way that moves beyond our own egoistic fantasies.

Perhaps more importantly, on Antonaccio's view, art does not only help us characterise the struggle of moral perception, but it also helps identify the solution. If the problem of form in art is analogous to the "false consolations of linguistic form"¹⁵⁸ in consciousness, then the solution in art is likely to help us theorise about how to overcome the challenge posed by redescription and moral perception. Lita suggests that a key feature of moral perception is the confrontation of the "sublime".¹⁵⁹ The "sublime" here is described in opposition to beauty,¹⁶⁰ as that which evidences that "life is filled with uncertainties and contingencies".¹⁶¹ It is important to note that while Murdoch takes her concept of the *sublime* from Kant, hers is nonetheless distinct. For Kant, the sublime was a source of pleasure, or "exhilarat[ing]",¹⁶² whereas for Murdoch it is not pleasurable, rather sublime "a sharp recognition of the fact that the others are, to a degree that we never cease to discover, different from ourselves".¹⁶³ Lita observes that a moral perception that was constituted exclusively in the perception of others' virtues would in fact provide a limiting, rather than a realistic view of another person. Rather, "common moral intuition tells us that perhaps the most important regard for others is that which we should have when they suffer or fail to come up to a supposed standard of virtue".¹⁶⁴ Accepting that other people are unpredictable, unreliable, and fundamentally unknowable, and that life is "chancy"¹⁶⁵ is crucial to a clear perception of reality on Murdoch's view.

In rare circumstances, great art "proclaims its own incompleteness"¹⁶⁶ and thereby references the sublime. Murdoch suggests that an example of such incompleteness in art is in a failure to adhere to the conventions of genre: "perhaps one of the greatest achievements of all is to join [a] sense of absolute mortality not to the tragic but to the comic".¹⁶⁷ John Sturrock cites Murdoch's own novels as examples of this "achievement": "The comic spirit in her novels is what relates her philosophical concerns to real life, comedy being always able to cut elevated

¹⁵⁸ Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch*, 96.

¹⁵⁹ Lita, "Iris Murdoch's Criticism of Traditional Views of the Moral Self: An Alternate Account of "seeing" the Others," 103.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 43.

¹⁶² Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 71.

¹⁶³ Lita, "Iris Murdoch's Criticism of Traditional Views of the Moral Self: An Alternate Account of "seeing" the Others," 104.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 114.

¹⁶⁵ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 97.

¹⁶⁶ Meszaros, *Selfless Love and Human Flourishing in Paul Tillich and Iris Murdoch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 142.

¹⁶⁷ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 85.

ideas down to size and integrate them with the pettinesses of everyday.”¹⁶⁸ Murdoch suggests that the sublime in art is “a template for the tragic in life”,¹⁶⁹ whose insights risk being obfuscated by a more perfect form. The claim is that if we try to make sense of the tragic, to add a structure, we end up “monumentalizing [our] own suffering (showing [our]selves as heroes against the world)”.¹⁷⁰ Accepting the sublime in art demands recognising the incompleteness of form.

Similarly, Antonaccio characterises the attainment of moral perception as a process of taking responsibility for the way linguistic forms limit our consciousness. She states,

“Murdoch's reflexive understanding of moral perception requires the individual agent to resist the false consolations of linguistic form through the very structures of language itself. In the same way, the loving perception of others requires the overcoming of egoism not through the negation of images or the extinction of the self, but in and through the acceptance of oneself as an individual who is responsible for one's relation to language.”¹⁷¹

Therefore, by contemplating aesthetic perception and identifying the features of the sublime in art, we can also come to understand the significance of acknowledging the sublime in moral perception. Recognising that the form of language inevitably limits our moral perceptual capacities is crucial. Altorf similarly observes, “Moral agents and artists are allowed their *inability* to express the truth or goodness of their work and doings.”¹⁷² Just as artists must recognise the limits of form to convey the infinite complexity of their subject matter, the work of moral perception demands that we recognise the limits of language in our pursuit to understand others.

III.2. Client's Vision of Art-Object

It is not only the artist's vision that is analogous to moral perception, but also the client's vision of the artwork. Thinking about the distinctive features of aesthetic viewing; what it means to see something *as art* can help us work towards a better understanding of moral perception, insofar as aesthetic and moral perception are analogous. The analogy being drawn here between a client looking at an artwork, and individual contemplation of other humans, relies on understanding the art-object as analogous with a human: “the art-object is an analogy of the

¹⁶⁸ John Sturrock, “Reading Iris Murdoch,” *Salmagundi* 80 (1988): 148

¹⁶⁹ Lita, “Iris Murdoch's Criticism of Traditional Views of the Moral Self: An Alternate Account of “seeing” the Others,” 114.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch*, 96.

¹⁷² Marije Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 85 (my emphasis).

person-object”.¹⁷³ Murdoch characterises the art-object as a “kind of soul”¹⁷⁴ given that it necessarily presents itself as a self-contained whole: “insofar as an art object presents itself as a unit, it images... the ego-self.”¹⁷⁵ In this way, Murdoch develops “understanding of regard for others *through aesthetic perception*”.¹⁷⁶ In this section, I will discuss the key similarities and differences between aesthetic and moral perception, and outline the features of moral perception, which they each illuminate, including imagination, detachment, and attitudes of attention.

It is important to note at the outset that moral perception has further reach than just the perception of other people. In the first chapter there was a lengthy discussion of the perception of the morally salient features in a daily situation, using Blum’s example of Joan and John on the train. Murdoch, however, emphasises the significance of morally perceiving *other people*, who she characterises as, “far more complicated and enigmatic and ambiguous than anything else we might consider an object of moral concern”.¹⁷⁷ The focus here is not on a moral perception of a situation, rather with a greater challenge; that of applying a loving gaze to another person. The features of moral perception identified here are arguably particular to the task of perceiving others, such that they could not be applied to other instances of moral perception, such as the example from Blum. However, given the significance Murdoch imposes on the moral perception of other people, even this very narrow focus warrants attention.

III.2.1. Aesthetic and Moral Perception as Analogous: Detachment and Imagination

Looking at an art-object as a client, and perceiving another human, are analogous insofar as they both require imagined synthesis on the part of the onlooker. Lita argues that appreciating beauty in art requires imagined synthesis of parts into a cohesive whole. She suggests that the kind of beauty displayed in art is “a purposiveness of form directed at or oriented toward an idea of the goodness of the object apprehended as beautiful”.¹⁷⁸ On this account, appreciating the beauty of the object is dependent on understanding it *as a work of art*, for example “the beauty of a man or of a building presupposes a concept of the end that defines what the thing has to be

¹⁷³ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 81.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 163.

¹⁷⁵ Meszaros, *Selfless Love and Human Flourishing in Paul Tillich and Iris Murdoch*, 139.

¹⁷⁶ Lita, “Iris Murdoch’s Criticism of Traditional Views of the Moral Self: An Alternate Account of “seeing” the Others,” 110 (my emphasis).

¹⁷⁷ Clarke, “The Lens of Character: Aristotle, Murdoch and the Idea of Moral Perception,” 74.

¹⁷⁸ Lita, “Iris Murdoch’s Criticism of Traditional Views of the Moral Self: An Alternate Account of “seeing” the Others,” 113.

and therefore a concept of its perfection”.¹⁷⁹ That is, to contemplate a work of art and attempt to appreciate it *as art* is to pay attention to its form, as well as the individual parts of which it is comprised. To see a painting is not just to look at an arrangement of colours and lines, but to see that arrangement *as a painting*, or to use Lita’s example; “in the form of a vase, the feeling of its beauty, is to be oriented toward the idea of the fulfillment of its purpose *as a vase*”¹⁸⁰ (emphasis added). Or as Murdoch states, “hearing sounds is not hearing a symphony unless we hear it as a symphony”.¹⁸¹ To see an art-object as art, therefore, requires an understanding of it as a whole, and “involves the idea of a sustained *experienced* mental synthesis”.¹⁸² Understanding an art-object as art requires sustained synthesis of its parts in light of an understanding of its form.

Morally perceiving other people is analogous to perceiving beauty in art, insofar as it demands imagined synthesis. In the case of another person, the form or whole that they compromise is that of a person who is capable of evidencing the existence of the Good. To return to the example of the mother-in-law, she resolves to see her daughter-in-law in a better light,¹⁸³ and in so doing, begins with the assumption that there is more to see. She starts with an assumption of the daughter’s fundamental goodness, and then “M comes to see in her daughter D a purposiveness with respect to goods which she identifies by way of the “secondary moral terms”.¹⁸⁴ By identifying traits in D, which correspond with M’s concept of the Good, she starts to work towards a view of D as a good person. This is not to say that there is one form of the Good, to which our perceptions of other people must adhere, or as Lita states, “This does not mean that one simply learns a rule for recognising the virtues of others... what is important is not learning to apply secondary moral terms as a matter of rule, but learning to extend moral language to fit ever new cases”.¹⁸⁵ Having a concept of an artwork *as a painting* does not require that all paintings be viewed as the same. Rather, it demands that we at once appreciate the particularities of the work, and also understand its adherence to a particular form. In the same way, understanding another person *as good* requires that we synthesise our perception of their unique traits in light of an understanding of them as Good. Hence, contemplating aesthetic perception brings us to a greater understanding of Murdoch’s claim that “The enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue”.¹⁸⁶ We can observe that in the same way that we synthesise the

¹⁷⁹ Lita, “Iris Murdoch’s Criticism of Traditional Views of the Moral Self: An Alternate Account of “seeing” the Others,” 113.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 3.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 17.

¹⁸⁴ Lita, “Iris Murdoch’s Criticism of Traditional Views of the Moral Self: An Alternate Account of “seeing” the Others,” 109.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 84.

different formal features of the artwork to picture it *as a whole*, we synthesise different language concepts (formal features) to create a picture of the person *as Good*.

It is important to distinguish the claim that perceiving the Good in another person is analogous to appreciating beauty, from the discussion regarding thick concepts in the previous chapter. The claim there was that beauty and the Good are “part of the same structure”¹⁸⁷ such that seeing beauty, for example, in art, allows us to acquire the artist’s concept of the Good. Here I am not attempting to argue that seeing beauty *constitutes* seeing the Good, rather that the work of perceiving the Good is analogous to appreciating beauty, insofar as both require imagined synthesis in light of an understanding of the object (be it art-object or other person) as a cohesive whole.

Further, contemplation of art-objects, and moral perception of other people both demand not only imagined synthesis, but also a detached respect for the object for its own sake. Murdoch defines a work of art as “a self-contained structure, which we set ourselves, in a certain mood of detachment and with a previous knowledge and acceptance of certain conventions, to consider as a whole,”¹⁸⁸ and also characterises the art-object as “existing for its own sake”.¹⁸⁹ The consideration of the art-object “as a whole” is intrinsically respectful, because it demands that we take a non-appropriative stance insofar as we do not attempt to change the art-object¹⁹⁰ or “appropriate it into the greedy organism of the self”,¹⁹¹ rather understand that “it is for nothing, it is for itself”.¹⁹² For example, if we were to perceive a sculpture as a chair, and sit on it, we would “appropriate it”¹⁹³ to our own ends. Murdoch suggests that children can learn “respect”¹⁹⁴ from attending to art. She imagines what we might say to very young children having early experiences with art: “Look, listen, isn’t that pretty, isn’t that nice?” Also, ‘Don’t touch!’¹⁹⁵ She then goes on to conclude that this is “moral training as well as preparation for a pleasurable life.”¹⁹⁶ Insofar as art demands respect if it is to be understood as art at all, aesthetic viewing necessitates detachment, and a selfless regard for the art-object *for its own sake*.

To the extent that moral perception requires imagined synthesis and detachment, it is analogous with aesthetic perception. It might be the case that this observation has no practical import, given that it might not increase our instances of moral perception. Although I defend

¹⁸⁷ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 40.

¹⁸⁸ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 55.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁹⁰ Dunbar, “On Art, Morals and Religion: Some Reflections on the Work of Iris Murdoch,” 521.

¹⁹¹ Murdoch, *the Sovereignty of Good*, 64.

¹⁹² Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 8.

¹⁹³ Murdoch, *the Sovereignty of Good*, 64.

¹⁹⁴ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 3.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

that the two types of vision are analogous, I do not make any claim to their being identical. As such, in an attempt to perceive of another person morally, it would not assist to recommend that I perceive of them as if they were an artwork. Although relevantly similar insofar as they both demand imagined synthesis, and detachment, art-objects and people are nonetheless distinct. It is the case, however, that we do engage in imagined synthesis and detachment regularly, whenever we form an understanding of a work of art *as art*. It is also the case, as Murdoch attests, that instances of moral perception in life are rare.¹⁹⁷ As such, if we want to understand what it is *like* to perceive of another morally, and what it requires, we can consider what it is like to appreciate a work of art, to respect it *as art*, and to view it in light of an understanding of its form.

III.2.2. *Aesthetic and Moral Perception as Distinct: Attitude of Attention*

As previously stated, I recognise that art-objects and humans are fundamentally distinct, such that aesthetic and moral vision are not interchangeable. We cannot necessarily achieve *aesthetic* perception of another person, so drawing an analogy between the two may not practically help us increase our instances of moral perception. However, it is nonetheless useful for theorising about what moral perception is like, and by for delineating the features of moral perception. For example, by exploring imagined synthesis and detachment in art, we can come to a better understanding of what Murdoch means when she insists that a loving gaze be both imaginative and detached. Further analysis of the extent to which the two modes of perception are *distinct* can also help us draw out a better understanding of the features of moral perception, in particular, the mode of attention required to perceive morally. I will first outline the requisite mode of attention, as identified by Christopher Cordner and Martha Nussbaum, and then discuss the extent to which art more easily occasions this kind of attention than other people.

Cordner suggests that Murdoch's account of moral perception needs to be understood as more complex than a just and loving vision that is constituted exclusively in an accurate perception of reality. He argues that critics such as Julia Driver, Lawrence Blum and Bridget Clarke "shoehorn seeing D truly, lovingly, justly into more highly focused registering of details".¹⁹⁸ That is, he wants to suggest that perceiving reality unselfishly is not just a matter of appreciating the particulars of an individual or situation (a view he labels *particularist*)¹⁹⁹ but also of our *manner* of attending. He distinguishes a just and loving gaze from attention to detail, suggesting that "There are various ways an orientation to details can manifest a looking that is

¹⁹⁷ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 38.

¹⁹⁸ Christopher Cordner, "Lessons of Murdochian Attention," *Sophia* 55, no. 2 (2016): 208.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 200.

less than just and loving, without being linked to any such intention or wish”.²⁰⁰ He also distinguishes a loving gaze from the *intensity* of our scrutiny, arguing that looking *closer* does not always equate to looking more lovingly and justly:

“If your way of looking is jealous or snobbish or sexist or racist, then your conceptual refinement will simply give you higher-resolution sexist or racist or snobbish ‘seeing.’ There is no reason at all to suppose that upping the degree of your conceptual refinement (or intensity of focus, or scrutiny) will itself lead you to ‘see truly.’”²⁰¹

Cordner thus establishes a need to characterise moral perception in terms other than close and intense attention to detail, and suggests a move away from particularist readings of Murdoch.

Cordner turns to Martha Nussbaum to articulate that which he perceives particularism as omitting. Nussbaum recounts her personal experience in conversation with Murdoch, and suggests that a just and loving gaze is not only constituted in the level of detail and information acquired by looking, but also in the onlookers reciprocal willingness to *be seen*. She writes:

“I had no doubt... that Murdoch could have described me, after an hour, far more precisely than any lover of mine after some years.... But I think that there is something more to loving vision than just seeing. There is, for example, a willingness to permit oneself to be seen. There is also a willingness to stop seeing, to close one’s eyes before the loved one’s imperfections. There is also a willingness to be, for a time, an animal or even a plant, relinquishing the sharpness of creative alertness before the presence of a beloved body.”²⁰²

Here Nussbaum draws our attention to moral perception as *being seen* as well as seeing: a willingness to showcase “aspects of vulnerability, silence and grace”.²⁰³ To return to Murdoch’s famous example of the mother-in-law, the suggestion here is that when she resolves to see the daughter-in-law in a different light, she is also opening herself up to the prospect of caring for the D, and in so doing exposing herself to D. Needless to say D is absent, so it is not a literal opening up to being seen, rather a vulnerability, such that if D *were* present, she *could* engage with M differently than she had previously. Moral vision on this account can be characterised, not just by the features of a just and loving gaze, but also by a willingness to *be seen* by others.

Cordner uses Nussbaum’s anecdotal account of her experience with Murdoch to build up a more complex picture of what it means to perceive of another person morally. In a move away from particularism, he suggests that moral perception also requires serving, and waiting-on.

²⁰⁰ Cordner, “Lessons of Murdochian Attention,” 201.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 203.

²⁰² Martha Nussbaum, “‘Faint with Secret Knowledge’: Love and Vision in Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*,” in *Iris Murdoch: Philosopher*, ed. Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 152.

²⁰³ Nussbaum, “‘Faint with Secret Knowledge’: Love and Vision in Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*,” 152.

Serving is defined as “being present to another in a way that includes ‘letting oneself be seen or recognised’”,²⁰⁴ while waiting-on “help[s] give shape to Murdochian talk of attention as greater receptiveness to reality, and perhaps even as an increased sense of the reality of someone or something”.²⁰⁵ Here he again returns to the example of M and D, suggesting that M evidenced waiting-on, in her willingness to *respond* to D: “Her seeing of D is now more responsive to D, meaning that the reality of D now shapes her seeing of D to an extent it previously did not. The way she now sees D is thus more open—more exposed—to the reality of D, and that is precisely the form or mode of her vulnerability to D.”²⁰⁶ We can, therefore, understand moral perception as not only constituted in our mode of perceiving others, but also in our receptiveness to reciprocal perception by them.

If we accept Cordner’s view that a just and loving gaze is constituted not only in the manner of seeing, but of being seen, then a clear distinction between the perception of art and of people arises. Aesthetic vision is fundamentally distinct from moral vision, insofar as you cannot *be seen* by an artwork. You can nonetheless expose yourself to an artwork, or display vulnerability, and indeed we do so every time we see an object *as art*. To observe an object as art is, as we have already noted, necessarily to imaginatively synthesise its parts into a cohesive whole, and to view the object with a selfless detachment. Perceiving an object as art requires respectfully recognising that it exists for its own sake, and in most cases, accepting that it has a meaning to convey. As such, viewing an object as art showcases a willingness to *be moved* by it, and to engage emotionally, in a way that we do not with an object that we are appropriating or using to our own ends. Displaying vulnerability in our relation with art is easy, arguably even *required* if we are to understand an object as art at all. When we think of what is required to perceive an object *as art*, and we observe that such a task necessitates imagined synthesis, detachment, and a kind of *vulnerability* that we do not display to non-artistic objects, we can come to understand aesthetic vision as constituted not only in how we perceive the work, but in the *relationship* between us and the work. Here aesthetic perception is far *easier* than moral perception, but it nonetheless assists us in building up our picture of moral perception as multifaceted, and concerning both ways of seeing and *being seen*.

Drawing on the analogies between aesthetic and moral perception allows us to develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of moral perception. In so doing, we can also come to accept the role of art as multifaceted; Murdoch advocates for art as not only a vehicle for moral perception, but also as an *analogue*. Where art may fail to live up to the ambitious task of actually

²⁰⁴ Cordner, “Lessons of Murdochian Attention,” 213.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 211.

occasioning moral perception it can nonetheless help us build up a more complex conception of what moral perception *is*. In particular, analysing the similarities between aesthetic and moral vision brings us to a deeper understanding of not only the challenges of attaining moral perception, but also its complexity. The problem of form in art reveals moral perception to be obfuscated by an egoistic use of language, while the detachment, imagination and vulnerability required of aesthetic vision illuminate the same features in moral perception.

CONCLUSIONS

If we can accept the conclusion drawn in Part III about the extent to which moral perception is analogous with aesthetic vision, what is the significance of this conclusion for our understanding of Murdoch, and of moral perception generally?

The claim that art helps us actually achieve moral perception is arguably asking too much of art. Most interpretations of Murdoch have focussed on the rare instances where this is the case; where the artist attends to their subject with moral perception, and then renders it beautifully, and in so doing allows the artwork's client to acquire their moral perception. Even if we can allow that under rare conditions of greatness this is the case, accepting a view of art as occasioning moral perception leaves Murdoch's argument vulnerable to charges of elitism, unless we can provide a definition of great art that encompasses more than that which is Western and canonical.

However, I suggest that Murdoch's discussion of the role of art in moral perception is not limited to its potential as a vehicle for moral perception. Its more accessible role is as an explanatory analogy. Given that moral perception (especially of other people) is extremely challenging to attain, it is likely that our experiences of it will be rare. As such, understanding moral perception is not just a matter of drawing on past experience. If we are to understand the concept at all, we need to look to experiences that are analogous if not identical, and that are more readily achievable than moral perception itself. This is the crucial role that art plays in Murdoch's account of moral perception.

It is important to stress that recognising this analogy is not *essential* to understanding moral perception. As Lita states, "Murdoch is not claiming that persons need a refined aesthetic taste in the usual sense in order to be moral. She is saying that within common morality there is to be seen or discerned a kind of vision or perception of others, which is best understood theoretically as an "aesthetic perception"".²⁰⁷ The claim here is not that those who have seen more art will necessarily be more moral. The observation is rather that if we were minded to work towards a better understanding both of Murdoch's aesthetics and ethics, and moral perception generally, art could play a central role.

Insofar as we can accept Murdoch's account of moral perception, we can also accept that art has a crucial explanatory role to play. We cannot do justice to the complexity of Murdoch's work without considering art as having not only a practical role in occasioning moral perception,

²⁰⁷ Lita, "Iris Murdoch's Criticism of Traditional Views of the Moral Self: An Alternate Account of "seeing" the Others," 111.

but also an explanatory role in deepening our understanding of it. I have argued that this latter role has been largely overlooked in favour of the weaker, comparatively limited claim about art's potential to offer its client a practical experience of moral perception. As such, the explanatory role of art in moral perception merits further analysis in the pursuit of a more charitable reading of Murdoch's aesthetics, and a more complex understanding of moral perception generally.

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