

Iris Murdoch's Notion of Attention: Seeing the Moral Life in Teaching

Susan McDonough
University of Illinois-Chicago

Moral philosophy develops from an interest in thinking about the world. Moral philosophers think about people and how they live and move in this world. More than this, they are interested in investigating ways of looking and interacting in the world that are worthy for each of us.

In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Iris Murdoch challenges the reader to link the moral life with an ideal of moral vision. In her view, how we act in the world mirrors what we see. Murdoch writes, "I can only choose within the world I can see, in the moral sense of 'see' which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort."¹ Seeing, however, is not an end in itself for Murdoch. Rather, "it is one way in which she makes clear that the moral life cannot be divorced from the substance of the world."²

What is it that Murdoch means to contribute to moral philosophy and to humankind? What is the "worthy ideal" that she explores and proposes for us to consider and enact that will answer the question (a question she puts to all of moral philosophy), "How can we make ourselves better?"³

Central to her conception of a moral vision is the notion of "attention," a word that she borrows from Simone Weil.⁴ Murdoch uses the word "to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality." It is, she continues, "the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent."⁵ Attention is more than simply "looking." As used by Murdoch, it is what enables us to see and to act in the light of the moral good. The moral life is part of a dynamic process that "goes on continually" and it hinges on an awareness and recognition of others brought to light through a sustained attention to individual realities.

In this essay, I examine Murdoch's notion of attention and how it grounds and enables humankind to pursue the moral. On the basis of this analysis, I suggest that her concept of attention has great applicability to the practice of teaching.

BEYOND EMOTION AND REASON TOWARD A "JUST AND LOVING GAZE"

The "active moral agent" is one who exercises a "just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality." The words "just" and "loving," if separated from the rest, conjure images of a fair or rational approach combined with a caring, affective approach. Seeing these words, one might believe that Murdoch is one of a number of philosophers who positions herself in a discussion concerning the reason-laden or the emotion-laden nature of moral philosophy. Socrates, Confucius, Aristotle, and Kant, to name only a noted handful, have each taken up banners for the place of reason and/or the place of emotion in the moral process. But Murdoch is not easily categorized. Her framework of the moral life circumvents a discussion on the place of emotions and reason in moral reasoning, turning instead to a focus on the

development of a moral vision.⁶ Nonetheless, she does have a position on emotions and intellect.

Where the intellectual component involved in Murdoch's moral vision seems self-evident, the emotional component is not. Murdoch reinforces throughout her writing the embeddedness of an intellectual process in careful attention. On the one hand her choice of words such as: "moral effort," "just," "clear-eyed contemplation," "reflection," "directed," each conjure up images of a reasoned approach. On the other hand, Murdoch seems to resist a discussion of the place of emotions (and in the process suggest to others that there is no place for emotions) in the development of a moral vision. Why would she leave herself open to potential criticisms?

Martha Nussbaum's work offers potentially the most pointed critique of Murdoch for not recognizing the place of emotions in building one's moral perception.⁷ Many of Nussbaum's ideas could be taken to be a stinging rebuke of Platonic and other approaches to the moral life that privilege reason. Given that Murdoch's philosophy owes much to Plato's conceptions of the moral life, it might seem logical to conclude that Murdoch and Nussbaum are in opposite camps on the issue of emotion. But to do so would be premature.

Nussbaum is taken with an Aristotelian position that demands that humankind attend to emotions. She writes,

The agent who discerns intellectually that a friend is in need or that a loved one has died, but who fails to respond to these facts with appropriate sympathy or grief, clearly lacks a part of Aristotelian virtue. It seems right to say...that a part of discernment or perception is lacking. This person does not really, or does not fully, see what has happened. We want to say...[that this person] really does not fully *know* it, because the emotional part of cognition is lacking....The emotions are themselves modes of vision, or recognition. Their responses are part of what knowing or truly recognizing or acknowledging, *consists in*.⁸

These claims suggest that, for Nussbaum, emotions render whole, or correct, our moral perception and actions.

Would Murdoch resist Nussbaum's position? Murdoch's work does not seem to contest that emotions can have a presence in moral vision. Murdoch uses the example of art as a way of illustrating how humankind can come to perceive beauty — to see something that partakes, in her outlook, in the elusive quality of goodness. She writes, "it is when form is used to isolate, to explore, to display something which is true that we are most highly moved and enlightened."⁹ We *feel* something in accord with what we *see* and come to know to be true. There is an emotional component that accompanies the moral awareness. For Murdoch, however, what one feels is relevant only to the extent that it is the natural result of seeing something real or true.

Murdoch resists positions that try to distinguish or separate the place of emotion and reason. Seeing something that is true and good "moves" and "enlightens" us. The two are aligned together and one is not given any more importance or necessity than the other. Moreover, the relevant resulting consciousness or feeling, and the knowledge acquired, are both the *result* of an enduring attention to something other than one's self. The focus of attention for Murdoch is not on one's individual

emotional or cognitive state. It is beyond and away from ourselves. In Murdoch's words, "We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need."¹⁰

Murdoch does not mean that we leave all past thoughts and emotions behind and face anew each situation that presents itself. As Lawrence Blum points out, Murdoch takes care to develop the idea that moral vision is something that must be worked at and developed, and our past experiences help teach us "what to notice, how to care, what to be sensitive to, how to get beyond [our] own biases and narrowness of vision."¹¹ For Murdoch there is a kind of continuity from past through the present that influences the contours of a person's moral life.¹² The ability to attend emerges over the course of a life.

Nonetheless, the place of emotions remains ambiguous in Murdoch's moral vision. Consider Murdoch's remarks related to the appreciation of beauty in art or nature:

It is important too that great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self. This exercise of *detachment* is difficult and valuable....Unsentimental contemplation of nature exhibits the same quality of detachment: selfish concerns vanish, nothing exists except the things which are seen....It is obvious here what is the role, for the artist or spectator, of exactness and good vision: unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention.¹³

Once more, Murdoch's statement might seem to marginalize the place of emotion in the moral life. Yet upon closer scrutiny, where in the above statement are emotions banned? As noted earlier, Murdoch might agree that right emotions ought to accompany our clear perception of others, but the emotions are such that they are directed at and resulting from an understanding of another's reality — a reality separate and distinctive from our own standpoint. Moreover, emotions inform our imagination, and imagination, for Murdoch, is critically connected to our perception of others. On imagining, Murdoch writes, "[it is] a type of reflection on people, events, which builds detail, adds colour, conjures up possibilities in ways which go beyond what could be said to be strictly factual. When this activity is thought to be bad it is sometimes called 'fantasy' or 'wishful thinking.'"¹⁴ Separated from the task of moral imagination and moral effort, Murdoch is concerned that emotions and images will wander dangerously unchecked and out of the sight of what is *really* the case. Moreover, it is because of the particularity of each experience, and above all, of each person, that we must strive to see others as *they are*, not as we are in relation to them, and not as we might fancy them to be. For Murdoch, "personal" emotions must take a side seat to a detached, "impersonal" vision or attention to another's reality.

According to Murdoch, the development of a true vision will only result from an exercise in "unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention." "Unsentimental contemplation" positions one to steer clear of nostalgic or romantic conceptions of what one is attending to. If totally unchecked, those conceptions might negate the integrity of what is being perceived. From another time, John Dewey seems to capture, in part, Murdoch's "unsentimental" intentions. Commenting on how art can transform the self, he writes, "We are carried out beyond ourselves to

find ourselves.”¹⁵ From a certain point of view, the self does not exist in the act of clear vision or perception. As Dewey might put it, in such an act the self is not a separate entity.

Returning to Murdoch, a “detached” contemplation is not a reference to an understanding or experience devoid of emotions, but rather the description is of a vision that puts the good of others above one’s own interest. The mother-in-law (M), in Murdoch’s well-known example, has to contemplate her daughter-in-law (D) in a detached way. She has to attempt to see her as separate from who M thinks she is, or thinks she should be.¹⁶ M needs to see D as she really is. In part, this means that M has to put her own relationship with her son, and other personal concerns, aside in order to free up her perception of her daughter-in-law. Any attempt to see D in all her particularity has to begin with a vision independent of M’s personal concerns. A moral vision does not allow for “selfish” concerns. A moral vision is respectful of the individual. Such visions are “objective” in the sense that what is perceived and known through a moral vision is real, independent of fantasy.

Thus far I have not elaborated on how the word “gaze” facilitates Murdoch’s purpose of extending our experiences beyond a purely reason- or emotion-laden position. The word gaze, as Murdoch uses it, seems to allow for a flexibility that the term vision might not at first glance provide. Where a vision might imply that we know what we are looking at or that we know what we are looking for, the act of “gazing” is more open and reminiscent of a childlike approach to “innocent seeing.” As adults we lose this innocent eye. We categorize, define, label, and sort our experiences and in the process we create more rigid ways of viewing the world. Details are lost and visions are blurred. The moral agent is one who reclaims and further develops, through a “just and loving gaze,” the ability to see the depth and beauty presented before it. As adults seeking to control our world we have attempted to define and capture the essence of what is good, when in fact the very process of doing so is itself destructive of the ideal and its boundless potentiality.¹⁷ What must be realized is that any understanding of the ideal will only be partial. Contingency itself constantly challenges our conceptions of what is good. To gaze upon something or someone is to open oneself up to the possibilities that are present. To gaze is to consider again the rush of details and particularity that confronts one.

Up to this point I have been developing the idea that Murdoch’s work reveals a framework of the moral life that allows one’s emotions, feelings, thoughts, and images to bear on the moral, but at the same time control and direction are demanded from the individual over each of these activities. Phrased another way, both thinking and feeling stand behind perception. They feed it and bring it along, but they do not stand in front of it. Clear perception, true perception or seeing, is what is to be held important and it is how we are able to ultimately encounter goodness. Murdoch is offering up a way for us to study and to enact the moral that will make us better.

To what are we to direct our attention? Murdoch’s response to this is in part answered by suggesting we focus our attention on the ideal of the Good. In a related way, Charles Taylor writes, “the image of the Good as the sun, in the light of which we can see clearly and with a kind of dispassionate love...helps define the direction

of attention and desire through which alone, [Murdoch] believes, we can become good.”¹⁸ Murdoch also provides us with a more tangible object of attention with the inclusion of the phrase “directed upon an individual reality.” What part does the phrase play in Murdoch’s definition of attention? It is in seeing humankind, in looking at others and seeing them as particular others, separate and distinct from one’s self, that Murdoch’s definition of attention finds footing in this world.

“DIRECTED UPON AN INDIVIDUAL REALITY”: ATTENDING TO ANOTHER

It might be helpful, at this point, to have an example, something around which we might be able to see and further consider Murdoch’s notion of attention. The example does not capture an ideal representation of Murdoch’s moral vision. Rather the example that follows is something which further uncovers the possibilities that classroom situations might carry. The example involves an educational methods course instructor, a teacher candidate, and students in a high school Spanish class.

The instructor has come to know a teacher candidate, Jolene, over the course of a shared semester of reading and dialoguing with her and other teachers-in-the-making. Jolene is one of twenty-six students assigned to the instructor’s class section. It is in this class that Jolene articulates a belief in humankind’s ability to work together for the common good. She claims that if left to follow their natural social instincts and inclinations, humankind would prevail in strong and worthy ways. She is frustrated by the number of school policies she witnesses that she regards as stifling to the individuality and interests of the high school adolescents. She believes, for example, that uniform policies and the “oppressive security systems” in the public schools are counterproductive to teaching and learning. She believes these systems conflict with a goal of education that seeks to nurture positive identity and social development in the students. In more general terms, this teacher candidate believes that if the school environment is one that neglects or stifles the natural interests of the adolescents, intellectual and moral development of the students would be compromised.

Central to the methods instructor’s role is her responsibility to prepare Jolene and the other teacher candidates for their classroom experiences. As a way to extend and further develop Jolene’s process of learning to teach, the methods instructor observes Jolene in the classroom setting and holds a debriefing session immediately afterward to further understand what has transpired and what might be built upon in future teaching endeavors.

The specific classroom vignette described below is from the viewpoint of the methods instructor. We imagine that the instructor is prepared to observe and attend to the nature of the learning experience that unfolds as a result of Jolene’s movements and choices during her lesson with the high school students. As the instructor watches Jolene interact with the students, she can see different ways in which Jolene’s philosophy begins to manifest itself. At one point, the instructor observed the following classroom scene and afterward reported the following:

Jolene was in the middle of conducting a Spanish lesson on vocabulary related to family members. Jolene had used throughout the lesson a variety of teaching methods to keep the students interested and involved. Most of the students followed along with the lesson, in part

because of its quick pace and varied activities requiring each of them to participate. At one point, when students were answering questions about sentence structure, Jolene noticed a group of four students in the back of the class who were beginning to talk louder amongst themselves. It was clear that they were no longer focused on the lesson and their talking became increasingly distracting to Jolene as well as the other students in the class. Jolene looked purposely at each of them. The look itself was not one of admonition or rebuke, rather Jolene seemed to indicate in part through her look a statement of "I am aware of what you are doing." There were no furrowed brows. Rather, her eyes were calm and her head was tilted slightly to the side. Moreover, rather than moving over towards the distracting students, making use of the classroom management technique of "proximity control," this teacher candidate, with her eyes still focused on the group of students, took a few steps backwards, away from the corner in which they were seated. It did not appear to be a move of fear or retreat. Noticing Jolene's reactions to them, the students quickly began to utter sounds of "Sh" among themselves. After the four were again listening to their classmates, Jolene moved over to where they sat and quietly stood among them — as if to say, "Now we are ready to move forward together." It seemed as though the students appreciated Jolene's reactions.

The entire episode described above was a very small and seemingly unnoteworthy ripple in a fifty-minute lesson — yet it captured the *attention* of the methods instructor. Moreover, I want to suggest that the vignette embodies the idea of a "just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality." For the purposes of this discussion, I focus my comments on the methods instructor and her interactions with the teacher candidate, Jolene.

The classroom vignette is described through what the methods instructor paid attention to with regard to Jolene. Why did this scene present itself as relevant? The instructor could not have anticipated it beyond bringing to bear an interest in how Jolene would interact with students. What sense does the instructor make of what she sees? How does that sense-making unfold? In answer, there seems necessarily an elusive nature to the way in which we develop and strengthen our way of seeing the good. The act of attending, developing an awareness of others and events and their significance, involves a sustained moral effort. The instructor had "to take in" the scene in a fundamentally contemplative way.

How might the methods instructor and Jolene work together to each further develop a "clear eye" of what transpired in the classroom and its potential significance? Suppose the methods instructor relayed what she saw above to Jolene. Suppose Jolene was completely unaware of what she did in the classroom with these four students. What purpose would such a conversation hold? How might each participant's imaginations be stretched in worthy ways? The beginning teacher in the vignette seems to have in mind a way of interacting with her students. The methods instructor, for her part, seems aware that Jolene is moving outside of typical methods like the use of proximity control to garner students' attention. What is the relationship between Jolene's developing philosophy of education and life and her reactions to her students in the classroom? How does awareness of one's interactions push and extend one's developing philosophy and its ideal?

Murdoch's hope in this example might be that the instructor's eyes serve as a tool or avenue through which the new teacher can begin to appreciate the depth of possibilities and events that unfold in a classroom. The instructor is uniquely positioned to advance the teacher candidate's discovery of reality as it relates to

herself and those she seeks to teach. Jolene might ask, How did I design the lesson? What questions did I ask? What did I do when I realized the students were not listening? What might I do differently? While such questions might be helpful to the reflective process, Murdoch suggests that considering only them would be limiting. Moreover, beginning with such questions neglects the larger reality of those in the classroom — a reality that extends beyond one’s own limited vision. To know if she is moving her students in worthy ways, Jolene must learn to see the day as those around her understand it — and, knowing does not exhaust meaning. To “know” her students describes not a terminus, but an opening up of new opportunities.

From Murdoch, then, come these important questions: As our moral perception is expanded, what are we as educators called upon to do with it? How will we feed our developed attention back into what it is that we are striving to do? How will the interactions of the teacher support the overriding goal of education — to help make it possible for students to better themselves intellectually and morally?

CONCLUSION: MOVING TOWARD UNDERSTANDING, GROWTH, AND TRUTH

Murdoch’s idea of a moral vision is inclusive of a broader philosophy and it attempts to provide, in part, an answer to the primordial question, How can we make ourselves better? As educators, we must sharpen our eyes as we continue to evaluate the manner in which we move in a classroom, and moreover, the manner in which we seek to encourage our students to move in the world. It is likely that as we take up Murdoch’s challenge of a moral vision, we will find, as in the example above, that there are more questions to be asked than answers to be found. That may be no surprise if Murdoch is correct that philosophizing is always a “return to the beginning.”¹⁹

I began my examination of Murdoch’s ideas with an exploration of the question, Why does Murdoch resist discussing the place of emotions? Why does she afford emotions room, allow them in the door, but resist offering them something to drink and eat? And, though we hear much of Murdoch’s fondness for Plato, she seems reluctant to take up arms with him completely in advancing an approach that emphasizes the place of reason. Making use of Nussbaum and her ideas as a provocateur, I then examined ways in which Murdoch separated her thinking from those who might privilege either a reasoned or an emotion-laden approach to moral philosophy.

From this explanation, it seems right to conclude that Murdoch is not interested in developing a philosophy that plays into a romantic self-indulgence or into an empirically limiting position that creates boundaries around something that, in her view, is neither confinable nor definable. For Murdoch, reason and emotion are conjoined in the call to be “just” and “loving” in our orientation toward another. They are positioned not in opposition to each other, but rather in a way that refuses to distinguish between the two. Indeed, Murdoch steadfastly refuses to focus on reason or emotion separately, believing that such a debate is unfruitful for her project. Had Murdoch answered my request to say more about the place of emotions, it would have been distracting from the concept of a moral vision that she was trying to develop. What can be said in light of Murdoch’s concept of a moral vision is that

it allows a place both for reason and a place for emotion, and in so doing, it sets up the possibility of realizing something greater than either one can alone make available to us.

In addition, my discussion touched on two inter-related issues that present themselves in the phrase, "just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality." Murdoch intends the attention to be *away from the self*, focused instead on an appreciation of another's reality which is what allows for and demands an attention to each individual's *particularity*. Murdoch seems to indicate that we are somehow joined with the world through our perception of others as distinct from us. Moreover, her suggestion that we attend to the particularity of others is one that she holds would best benefit all of humankind. She fashions what could be taken as a relativist position (in respecting the particularity of the individual) to present a general ideal way of acting and approaching the moral. She offers an explanation, a tool, a hope, and a way of being for humankind to seize onto and make use of in our quest to make themselves better social beings.

Finally, I suggested that Murdoch's approach opens new vistas for appreciating the significance of teaching and teacher education. In the example I provided, we see a teacher educator and a teacher candidate seeking to gaze "justly and lovingly" upon an important human reality. And though neither person might use Murdoch's terms, they help us perceive the potential in educational thought and practice.

-
1. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 37.
 2. Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 35.
 3. Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, 78.
 4. See Simon Weil, "Attention and Will," in *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (1952; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 169-76; Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in *Waiting for God* (1951; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 105-16.
 5. Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, 34.
 6. See Meredith Michaels, "Morality Without Distinction," *The Philosophic Forum* 17, no. 3 (1986): 175-87.
 7. Martha Nussbaum, "The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality," in *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 54-105.
 8. *Ibid.*, 79.
 9. Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, 65.
 10. *Ibid.*, 59.
 11. Lawrence Blum, "Particularity and Responsiveness," in *The Emergence of Morality in Young Children*, ed. Jerome Kagan and Sharon Lamb (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 306-37.
 12. Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, 37.
 13. *Ibid.*, 65-6.
 14. Murdoch, "The Darkness of Practical Reason," *Encounter* 27, no. 1 (1966): 48.
 15. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; reprint, New York: Perigee Books, 1980).
 16. Margret Buchmann, "The Careful Vision: How Practical is Contemplation in Teaching?" *American Journal of Education* 98, no. 1 (1989): 35-61.

17. See Franklin I. Gamwell, "On the Loss of Theism," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 171-89.

18. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 96.

19. Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, 1.