

(in parenthesis)

This worksheet focuses on **Iris Murdoch's** conception of **Moral Vision**. Motivated by a dissatisfaction, not just with particular views in ethical philosophy, but by the way ethical philosophy is conceived and practiced, Murdoch offers an alternative conception of ethics. Not only does she offer a distinctive view, focusing on quite novel concepts in the discourse of ethics (love, attention, vision, art, and particularity), she offers a distinctive way of doing ethical philosophy.

In this worksheet, students are encouraged to engage with Murdoch's ideas, explore and think about their application.

On the Nature of Morality (and Art)...

Art and morality are, with certain provisos...one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality.

(Iris Murdoch, *The Sublime and the Good*)

A final word about art and morals. To say that the essence of art is love is not to say, is nothing to do with saying, that art is didactic or educational. It is of course a fact that if art is love then art improves us morally, but this is, as it were, accidental. The level at which that love works which is art is deeper than the level at which we deliberate concerning improvement.

And indeed it is of the nature of Love to be something deeper than our conscious and more simply social morality, and to be sometimes destructive of it. This is why all dictators, and would-be dictators, from Plato to Khrushchev have mistrusted art. It is a fallacy which has worked confusion in modern philosophy that the only alternative to a sort of Bloomsbury art-for-art's sake theory of art is a sinister theory of didactic art. This is not so. The work of the great artists' shows up "art-for-art's sake" as a flimsy frivolous doctrine. Art is for life's sake, in the sense in which I have tried to indicate, or it is worthless.

(Iris Murdoch, *The Sublime and the Good*)

Questions For Discussion:

Do you think it is surprising to say that the essence of art and morality is the same? And that their essence is Love?

What does Murdoch say about "love"? Is it unusual in any way, and what do you think she means by it in these passages.

Perhaps more than as a 'philosopher', Iris Murdoch is well-known as a novelist. From her 'philosophical' writing, and her novels, it is clear that she sees writing fiction as a way to explore reality, morality, truth, and philosophy. In fact, she sees novels as a form of art for "life's sake". What do you think philosophy is, and how do you think that it differs, if at all, from fiction writing? Do you think that writing fiction could be a fruitful way of both doing philosophy, and, more strongly, a way to rethink what philosophy is?

Research: What is the "Bloomsbury art-for-art's sake" which Murdoch mentions? Perhaps read the prologue to Wilde's *Portrait of Dorian Gray*.

On Moral Vision...

A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him. Let us assume for the purposes of the example that the mother, who is a very "correct" person, behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way. We might underline this aspect of the example by supposing that the young couple have emigrated or that D is now dead: the point being to ensure that whatever is in question as happening happens entirely in M's mind.

Thus much for M's first thoughts about D. Time passes, and it could be that M settles down with a hardened sense of grievance and a fixed picture of D, imprisoned (if I may use a question-begging word) by the cliché: 'my poor son has married a silly vulgar girl'. However, the M of the example is an intelligent well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object, which confronts her. M tells herself: "I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again."

*(Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*)*

We defend ourselves by descriptions and tame the world by generalizing.

*(Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince*)*

It is important to remember that language itself is a moral medium, almost all uses of language convey value. This is one reason why we are almost always morally active. Life is soaked in the moral, literature is soaked in the moral. If we attempted to describe this room our descriptions would naturally carry all sorts of values. Value is only artificially and with difficulty expelled from language for scientific purposes.

Iris Murdoch ("Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings of Philosophy and Literature*)

Here is an example of a scenario Murdoch presents so that we can better understand how she thinks of ethics. There are another two passages which draw out crucial factors in her thinking: how we represent reality to ourselves, and others, using language; language as value-laden; and the relationship then between linguistic representation and moral experience.

Questions For Discussion:

Why do you think that Murdoch emphasises that this is the situation as it occurs *in the mother's mind*?

What role does representation play in the scenario? — as in: the way that the mother *represents* her daughter-in-law to herself.

Why does Murdoch note that the mother's representation of her daughter-in-law is a *cliche*? (Think about the quotation from the Black Prince, and the earlier idea that the essence of morality is Love, and love is an attendance to *reality*).

Murdoch emphasises the character of the mother, suggesting that she will reconsider how she 'sees' her daughter in law. Why do you think the mother's character is important in Murdoch's example?

What do you think the mother must do in order to 'see' her daughter-in-law differently; and perhaps, one might say, more 'fairly'?

The idea of attention or contemplation, of looking carefully at something and holding it before the mind, may be conveyed early on in childhood. 'Look, listen, isn't that pretty, isn't that nice?' Also, 'Don't touch!' This is moral training as well as preparation for a pleasurable life. [...] Children, if they are lucky, are invited to attend to pictures or objects, or listen quietly to music or stories and verses'

(Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide To Morals*)

If we reflect upon courage and ask why we think it to be a virtue, what kind of courage is the highest, what distinguishes courage from rashness, ferocity, self-assertion, and so on, we are bound, in our explanation, to use the names of other virtues. The best kind of courage ... is steadfast, calm, temperate, intelligent, loving ...

(Iris Murdoch, *On "God" and "Good"*)

What counteracts the system [of self-centered fantasy] is attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love. In the case of art and nature such attention is immediately rewarded by the enjoyment of beauty. In the case of morality, though there are sometimes rewards, the idea of a reward is out of place. Freedom is not strictly the exercise of the will, but rather the experience of accurate vision which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action [...] The same virtues, in the end the same virtue (love), are required, and fantasy (self) can prevent us from seeing a blade of grass just as it can prevent us from seeing another person

(Iris Murdoch, *On "God" and "Good"*)

In these excerpts Murdoch introduces the notion of attention, linking it to character and a way of seeing and engaging with the world.

Questions For Discussion:

What do you think **looking carefully** is? — draw on your discussions so far, as hopefully you will be building up a picture by now of what Murdoch has in mind.

Murdoch seems to think that teaching and experience is important to developing this attention. Why do you think we need to be taught the sort of attention she is talking about? What kind of teaching is at work here? e.g., is this teaching a 'giving of information'?

Murdoch thinks that practice and experience are important for attending to the world. Why do you think that is?

Again, trying to understand what Murdoch has in mind with attention, what sort of attention would a person have, if they had the virtues mentioned in the second excerpt?

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Finally then, Murdoch argues that it is (the right kind of) attention, motivated by love, which allows us to engage with reality as it really is. Love seems to involve a lack of self-centredness and an immediate disposition to care for, and attend to, the world. Love provides the sort of basis from which we can reason morally, but does not consist in reasons itself. Rather, love is a relationship to the world, experienced in our attention and practices of caring. It is only when we have a loving relationship to the world that we attend to reality properly — not just our fantasised versions of reality. Ethics, then, is an understanding of this relationship, its character, and the structure of experience.

Contrast such a view of ethics, and morality, as conceived in any other major ethical system, e.g., utilitarianism, deontology, (Aristotelian) virtue ethics. How, if at all, does the content and style of Murdoch's philosophy differ from those other theories?

Do you think that Murdoch's view of ethics is a good one?

Practice!

In this section, some excerpts from books are suggested for discussion. These are particularly interesting to evaluate in terms of Murdoch's ideas concerning love, attention, and representation.

This first excerpt is just part of a famous description in *American Psycho*. This is a novel by Brett Easton Ellis satirising 80s consumer, capitalist culture. The "psycho", Patrick Bateman, is the book's protagonist, and the book is told from his point of view. The descriptions in the book are his descriptions; they show us how he sees the world, and the character of his psychology. Whilst Murdoch and Ellis are very different writers in many respects, Ellis' portrayal of Bateman's immorality isn't just in immoral acts, but how Bateman *sees the world*...even down to his descriptions of his room! How does the following excerpt give us clues that Bateman is without moral vision, and how does this help us understand what moral vision might be?

In the early light of a May dawn this is what the living room of my apartment looks like: Over the white marble and granite gas-log fireplace hangs an original David Onica. It's a six-foot-by-four-foot portrait of a naked woman, mostly done in muted grays and olives, sitting on a chaise longue watching MTV, the backdrop a Martian landscape, a gleaming mauve desert scattered with dead, gutted fish, smashed plates rising like a sunburst above the woman's yellow head, and the whole thing is framed in black aluminum steel. The painting overlooks a long white down-filled sofa and a thirty-inch digital TV set from Toshiba; it's a high-contrast highly defined model plus it has a four-corner video stand with a high-tech tube combination from NEC with a picture-in-picture digital effects system (plus freeze-frame); the audio includes built-in MTS and a five-watt-per-channel on-board amp. A Toshiba VCR sits in a glass case beneath the TV set; it's a super-high-band Beta unit and has built-in editing function including a character generator with eight-page memory, a high-band record and playback, and three-week, eight-event timer. A hurricane halogen lamp is placed in each corner of the living room. Thin white venetian blinds cover all eight floor-to-ceiling windows. A glass-top coffee table with oak legs

by Turchin sits in front of the sofa, with Steuben glass animals placed strategically around expensive crystal ashtrays from Fortunoff, though I don't smoke. Next to the Wurlitzer jukebox is a black ebony Baldwin concert grand piano. A polished white oak floor runs throughout the apartment. On the other side of the room, next to a desk and a magazine rack by Gio Ponti, is a complete stereo system (CD player, tape deck, tuner, amplifier) by Sansui with six-foot Duntech Sovereign 2001 speakers in Brazilian rosewood. A downfilled futon lies on an oakwood frame in the center of the bedroom. Against the wall is a Panasonic thirty-one-inch set with a direct-view screen and stereo sound and beneath it in a glass case is a Toshiba VCR. I'm not sure if the time on the Sony digital alarm clock is correct so I have to sit up then look down at the time flashing on and off on the VCR, then pick up the Ettore Sottsass push-button phone that rests on the steel and glass nightstand next to the bed and dial the time number. A cream leather, steel and wood chair designed by Eric Marcus is in one corner of the room, a molded plywood chair in the other. A black-dotted beige and white Maud Sienna carpet covers most of the floor. One wall is hidden by four chests of immense bleached mahogany drawers. In bed I'm wearing Ralph Lauren silk pajamas and when I get up I slip on a paisley ancient madder robe and walk to the bathroom. I urinate while trying to make out the puffiness of my reflection in the glass that encases a baseball poster hung above the toilet. After I change into Ralph Lauren monogrammed boxer shorts and a Fair Isle sweater and slide into silk polka-dot Enrico Hidolin slippers I tie a plastic ice pack around my face and commence with the morning's stretching exercises.

(Brett Easton-Ellis, *American Psycho*)

The following passage is taken from Toni Morrison's debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*. The book tackles the legacy of slavery and racism and their persistence in the African-American experience. It focuses on beauty standards, and how white beauty standards have been internalised by the African-American community. In this astonishing passage, Morrison reflects on how a person can be used and demeaned by application of these general standards.

"All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us--all who knew her--felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor.

Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used--to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength.

And fantasy it was, for we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved. We courted death in order to call ourselves brave, and hid like thieves from life. We substituted good grammar for intellect; we switched habits to simulate maturity; we rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the Word."

(Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*)

Questions For Discussion:

Bateman's descriptions reveal a lot about the role of facts in his thinking, and of value.

Bateman is clearly careful and attentive, but is he careful and attentive in the way that Murdoch has in mind? If not, in what way and what might that tell us about Murdoch's view?

Do you think Easton's writing in *American Psycho* helps us to understand, by contrast, what it is to see the world morally?

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In a short space, how does Morrison work with the ideas we've been discussing: the difference between seeing a fantasised version of reality vs. reality; the role of representation in fantasy; the moral import of fantasy and representation.

What sort of attention does Morrison show as a writer?

How does Morrison assess the attention of her characters?

Bibliography

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