

(in parenthesis)

This is a set of **supplementary notes** for the worksheet entitled **Moral Vision**. The other worksheet is designed to be given to students as part of the class. This worksheet is for the teacher's use.

Introduction

The material covered in the other sheet is complex and tricky. In no small part because Murdoch is responding to traditions in ethics, and to philosophy in general — in particular, Enlightenment philosophy. Furthermore, we don't expect the student to have read Murdoch's work in any detail, and what is offered on the worksheet is a tiny sample. As such, it would be unreasonable to expect students to be able to grasp Murdoch's position either comprehensively or with fidelity.

The intention, really, is simply to get the students thinking in ways which may be different to what they're used to/or expect in philosophy. And to introduce them to women who have interesting and important things to say about topics on the curriculum, but who are not featured. As such, discussions should be exploratory rather than focused on getting things 'right', as it were.

Below are some thoughts on what we had in mind with the selections chosen in the worksheet, and with the questions asked. Hopefully this will give you, the teacher, some further insight on the material, and how you might want to help promote, motivate, and steer discussion.

Brief overview of Murdoch's project

Iris Murdoch's ethics is a response, of sorts, to certain some conceptions of ethics. Firstly, that it is just a rational activity; secondly, that the aim of moral theory is just to analyse and produce norms for action. By contrast, whilst agreeing that reflection and cognition are important features of our ethical lives, ethics is a fundamental feature of embodied, social subjectivity. Being moral is first and foremost a way of being in the world, even prior to normative behaviour within some prescribed 'moral situation'.

So, as ethicists, it's not just about developing a norm producing system. Rather, we should focus more deeply on how we engage with the world. Murdoch's answer to that is love. One might think that love is standardly normative. To be loving is to perform particular kinds of actions which are 'good'.

I don't think Murdoch would disagree with this. However, her view of loving is more unusual, and more fundamental. It's not simply the normative claim that one ought to love, because love is kind, kindness is good, and one ought to what is good for example. Love's goodness is prior to the moral value of other qualities, for a start. Secondly, love makes possible, as it were, any kind of moral behaviour.

Loving is, a fundamental relationship between self and world, characterised by care and attention. Careful attention is a persistent, dynamic interest to the particularity of a situation, a person, or thing. A kind of attention which tries to avoid prejudice, ready made opinions, that glosses the unique particularity of things in ready made formulas and representations — such as cliches. It is also, by way of its attentiveness, aware that even attentive representations can become reified, congealed, cliched and barriers to attentiveness. Hence attentiveness is not achieved by single, stand-alone actions, but is a constant manner of being in constant revision.

How might this relate to a more traditional ethics? Murdoch's view is that once this kind of being is in place, alongside the character required to be attentive in this way, then 'good actions' will fall into place. Hence she is a kind of moral particularist.

With these brief notes in mind, consider the questions:

On the nature of morality (and art)

— In a somewhat Kantian move, Murdoch sees that the sort of disposition involved in looking at art, is the same as that involved in moral vision. To attend to art is to attend to the work in its unique particularity, and requires careful, calm, engagement in which space is afforded to the artwork to speak. So, a reflection on how we are in galleries/exhibitions: how do we look, what is our attitude when considering art; then how might that be like the sort of attention involved in loving.

— Here is a good opportunity for students to explore pre-theoretical intuitions about philosophy. Here are some intuitions that a student may have:

Philosophy:

Rational; prescriptive; consists in arguments, and the giving and taking of arguments in debate; logical; a competitive, dialogue; aimed at (general?) truth(s); specialist (requires expertise and cannot be properly conducted by someone not trained in philosophy); abstract; systematic; general/generalising; dealing with issues beyond the socio-historical domains; etc.

Literature:

Emotional; descriptive; narrative; monological; unbound by logic and truth; non-specialist; non-systematic; non-technical (?); about particular people/situations/events/things; unreal/fictional.

A key thought for Murdoch, as a novelist and a philosopher, is how can writing fiction be a way of doing philosophy, and even transformative of it. There's no easy answer to that. However, it's telling that she was quite critical of philosophy as a discipline that is captured by the intuitions suggested above. As such, she was more interested in being a writer than a 'philosopher'.

However, it is clear that she is still trying to find a way to think, shall we say, through her literature. She thinks that some writing, call it literature, is art because it does aim at truth. Not general truths, or abstract truths, or truths that are validated by logical argument. But rather that the exploration of situations through fiction allows us to focus on situations in a way which is transformative of the reader, and will enable them to attend to situations in a careful and attentive way. It is a kind of performative philosophy, a practice, rather than a static amalgam of ideas in the form of systems, and theories.

With good writing, not only do we have to be attentive, but we engage with someone who is attentive (the writer), and we see situations, people and things represented, in the language used and in the image presented, in an attentive way.

So signs of good literature, for Murdoch, will be works which engage with socio-historical reality — even if it consists in made up scenarios. Those scenarios are not gratuitous fabrications, but are reflections as it were of social reality. Good literature will avoid generic, cliched, representations, but will search to represent situations with clarity and with a level of precision appropriate to bringing out what is unique in the situation/person/thing. Conversely, generalised, lazy descriptions for poorly realised, generic events/character tropes/commodified objects.

Hence, art is uniquely placed for people to learn to love, and to exercise love, in the way Murdoch conceives it. It trains people to see morally rather than to furnish them with a set of moral maxims to deploy according to demands of ethical systems. This is why she is against both didactic art (which operates in a way similar to systematic ethics, to provide the reader with something like moral propositions), and art-for-arts-sake which relinquished the moral value and possibilities of art.

Again, it's not important so much that the students understand 'Murdoch's philosophy' here, as much as simply explore some of these ideas, and be aware that they have some basis in the thinking of Iris Murdoch.

On Moral Vision

— The issue of it being in the mother's mind concerns her mental representation of the situation. There is a way that any situation is, but of course, we have experiences, conceptual frameworks, beliefs, etc., which, arguably, frame and mediate that experience. This is where the issue comes in whether we, a) acknowledge that our representations of the world are mediated, or do we fool ourselves, arguably, by thinking we see the world in some kind of value-free, transparent way? b) If we do acknowledge this mediation, what are we prepared to do about it? Do we simply accept it, and attend to reality just as we've represented it? Or, do we question these mental representations, allowing them to be revised? The latter requires persistent attention—not just 'staying in our heads'—to reality without the prejudice of our existing representations.

— As mentioned above, Murdoch is interested in linguistic representation. This is explicit in literature as a key feature of writing is the generation of images. But arguably representation a feature of perception and cognition. A judgement, a cognitive entity or event, say, could be considered a kind of representation. I represent some state of affairs as: "A cat on a mat". In the scenario, Murdoch focuses on these representations: there are particular value-laden words that the mother uses to represent the daughter (to herself). Some of those words are explicitly evaluative; some of the words are descriptive but they are loaded with evaluative connotations. The question for the mother, is does she recognise these evaluations?

— By definition the cliché, is a non-particular/or standardised representation. It could be a linguistic cliché, a cinematic cliché, etc. The problem is that the same representation is being used for non-identical referents. This gets metaphysically tricky but we won't worry too much about particulars and universals now! The basic idea is that individuals are particular, and a description that goes for one person won't quite fit another. If one ignores that difference, it is an index of lack of caring for that person. It's a lack of interest, or willingness to acknowledge a person's uniqueness, their particular character and agency. And this has moral consequences. In extreme cases, it reduces the importance of individuals, treating people as interchangeable units. This is quite simply the foundation for a lack of care for people in the conventional sense. Hence moral vision might not involve normative principles, but it does/should result in/motivate standardly moral behaviour.

— Murdoch is examining the kind of person who is loving, and what character traits are found in people who have this loving relationship to the world. The character traits she chooses are because these are the traits required to be attentive.

— Murdoch is clear that the image presented of the DIL by the MIL is not complete, or fair perhaps. There is a question then about how she should revise this image.

This point is controversial as to what Murdoch has in mind:
Seeing that the traits the MIL thought were bad are not in fact bad;
Adding to her picture of her DIL, with 'positive traits'.
Seeing that the negative traits are nuanced with positive traits.
Realising that positive traits always come with some negative traits.
Etc.

Again, these issues aren't to be sorted out in terms of Murdoch scholarship. The point is not to sort out what Murdoch actually thinks. But hopefully these are interesting possibilities for the students to think about.

There's also the question about persons who we think are genuinely evil.

— Teaching is going to be important to Murdoch in a number of ways. Firstly the teaching is encouraging a kind of practice and experience that the teacher directs. This is because what is crucial to Murdoch's ethics is a kind of practical attunement to the world. It certainly has a cognitive dimension: she still wants us to think and reason through moral states of affairs. But firstly, we need to develop a moral vision and that nests and forms a basis for our thinking. This is not innate or a priori but needs to be fostered; hence, the importance of teaching, and certain kinds of socialisation.

— The reason why *American Psycho* was chosen is because it is an interesting example of what might count as not having moral vision in Murdoch's sense. These are the features that could be picked out by students (alongside their own examples):

Bateman's vision is factive. He doesn't seem to see things in terms of (moral/even human) value — other than commercial value.

Critical to moral vision is seeing how the human, lived world is relational. This helps us to understand us as having a place and a role, in the broader social fabric and experience. This is critical for personal responsibility, empathy, etc. It's interesting that Bateman sees the world as an aggregation of objects and facts with very little relational value. Moreover, seeing the objects in terms of their brand is to see the objects generically. He has all these things but he doesn't care for them as particulars but just as instances of general types with certain social and financial capital value.

He doesn't seem to make any distinction between how he represents objects and how he treats descriptions of human phenomena (even descriptions of himself). He runs together the descriptions of furniture with descriptions about himself and his own activity.

The point being, this way of seeing the world, informs his behaviour in specific circumstances ranging from the banal to the horrific. If he saw the world differently, he would see in a way that makes such horrible actions impossible.

— The Bluest Eye was chosen because it is a great example of a writer reflecting on just how we treat others badly, and how that is a function of how we represent them to ourselves. As Morrison says, that representation is itself a product of fantasy. Morrison shows the difference between the reality and the fantasy by careful attention to the features of the fantasy and the reality and how those features relate, and are contradictory.

Arguably, its an excellent example, both in the writing performance, in terms of what we are being shown as readers, of what moral vision looks like. And what another kind of failure of moral vision might look like.



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