

The Ethics of Vision: Iris Murdoch on Moral Perception

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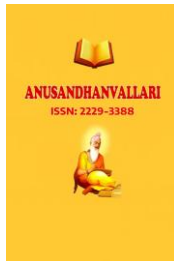
Abstract

A modern development in contemporary moral philosophy is Iris Murdoch's distinctive view of the moral self. Murdoch seeks to address what she perceives as the shortcomings of traditional ethics, which often centers on the will. Drawing inspiration from art appreciation, she argues that aesthetic perception is crucial for developing a moral regard for others. According to Murdoch, a moral person becomes truly oriented towards others through the practice of aesthetic perception, which involves the process of "unselfing" or shedding the ego. Unlike the Aristotelian focus on the rewards of virtue, Murdoch identifies self-interest, or the "ego," as the primary barrier to accurately perceiving others and, consequently, to acting virtuously towards them—since the ego is incapable of love. Murdoch's view of virtue is demanding, advocating for the refinement of moral vision as an end in itself. This conception of virtue aligns more closely with the sanctity of a saint rather than the hero's excellence. However, the key question arises: Is an aesthetic understanding of goodness in others is sufficient foundation for knowledge about virtue? To explore this, the article examines Murdoch's method of achieving aesthetic "seeing" through the cultivation of a "virtuous consciousness." This process, rooted in empathic experience, offers what Murdoch sees as the only genuine way to practice virtue towards others.

Keywords: Moral self; Aesthetic perception; Unselfing; Goodness; Virtuous consciousness

Introduction

Iris Murdoch(1919-1999) is a highly esteemed novelist, but her philosophical writings are not as well-known. Her contributions, however, occupy a special place in modern moral philosophy. Murdoch contends that integrating aesthetics and ethics is necessary for a correct comprehension of the moral self. The purpose of this article is to evaluate Murdoch's argument's plausibility. It also emphasizes her contribution to ethical theory, specifically her belief that aesthetic perception and "unselfing" of the ego work together to create a moral self that is truly focused on others. This procedure is similar to appreciating art. Murdoch believes that the primary obstacle to genuinely perceiving others is the ego. She also contends that selfless love is the necessary means for virtue to emerge, as opposed to emphasizing the benefits of virtue. Her theory's main strength is its explanation of how the aesthetic "seeing" of others and the subsequent move away from self-centeredness contribute to the



development of virtue and can be used to treat people morally and authentically. Murdoch argues that existentialism, liberalism, idealism, and philological pragmatism are insufficient in offering a moral framework that transcends free will and personal decisions. Murdoch thinks that in order to genuinely see people for who they are and be able to respond to them in a morally acceptable way, the moral self must transcend its ego rather than being seen as an isolated agent who creates value only through personal decisions.

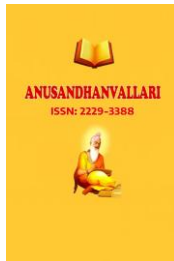
The two main topics of discussion in this article are (a) Murdoch's realistic conception of moral concern for others and (b) the function of aesthetic perception in the formation of virtue. To bolster her moral realism, Murdoch presents a cognitive meta-ethics, arguing that virtue is the knowledge of the good. But the question still stands: how can one judge another person's goodness if virtue is knowledge of the good and aesthetic perception is knowledge of the good that nurtures virtue? Murdoch's theory runs the risk of being accused of subjectivism in the absence of a well-defined criterion for evaluating the calibre of our perception of goodness in others. The essence of Murdoch's realism and cognitivism, as well as whether or not her depiction of the moral self as other-focused successfully offers a realist basis for morally valuing others, are the main points of contention in her defense of her viewpoint.

Ethics and Well-being

Murdoch challenges the neo-Aristotelian theory, which holds that moral virtue is limited to doing the right thing for the right reason, leading to the advantageous disposition that allows the agent to flourish or live a good life. Since the question of what makes a good and worthwhile life is at the center of contemporary Aristotelian ethics, moral virtue is typically related to practical reasoning and personal choice. Murdoch's rhetoric of virtue, in contrast to the Aristotelian idea, is essentially concerned with how we come to understand others through the cultivation of virtuous consciousness. In addition, individuals become virtuous due to necessity and chance rather than because it is beneficial for them to flourish and lead happy lives. Virtue is good in and of itself. In contrast to Aristotle, Murdoch asserts that there is no telos or external purpose to human life. As a result, evaluating whether a particular action is right or wrong in order to examine the purpose of life in definite:

There are properly many patterns and purposes within life, but there is no general and as it were externally guaranteed pattern or purpose of the kind for which philosophers and theologians used to search ... equally the various metaphysical substitutes for God – Reason, Science, History - are false deities. Our destiny can be examined but it cannot be justified or explained ... And if there is some kind of unity in human life, and the dream of this does not cease to haunt us, it is of some other kind and must be sought within a human experience which has nothing outside it (Murdoch 1997, 365).

Thus, if virtue has an instrumental value, then moral reasoning must begin with the particular ideas of virtue that each virtuous person actually-filled existence notions. Murdoch claims that a perfected kindness with a continual focus on the needs of others is the path to happiness, even if she does not eliminate "happiness" from the agent's life. She does not define happiness as flourishing or living well. According to her, telos is a misnomer and necessity and chance govern our lives, and contingency is the watchword (1989). She follows Rorty in this regard. Because of this reality's contingency, moral judgements cannot be based only on the development and application of a priori moral rules. These theoretically-provided moral idealisations ignore the "messy details" that provide ambiguity and complexity into our moral lives, instead focussing on the broad characteristics of the situations ethicists wish to examine. When faced with our shortcomings, we can try to



respond to non-ideal situations, but we rarely know how to respond to them with such abstract moral precepts. Although certainty might serve as a place for a specific existence, it can also serve as a cage in which an inescapable ignorance is imprisoned and sings its death.

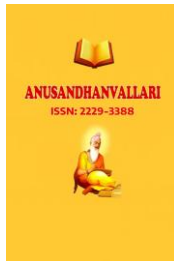
According to Murdoch, the best way to master the actual "messy details" of our lives is to rise above them. To do this, we must continue to navigate our moral journey, making sense of it as we go, living a life of experimentation, trying out various moral stances, changing our minds, and occasionally going back to the beginning. The endeavour to define and defend the worth of the contingently existent individual is at issue in this explanation of virtue. Since every person has a unique life experience, using impersonal moral principles or moral thought patterns is insufficient for the moral actor to comprehend the reality of others. As a result, virtuous consciousness's knowledge is a prerequisite as it is moral perception alone that may inspire people to treat others with the utmost respect:

However, I would contend that it is abundantly clear that goodness and knowledge are related at the level of serious common sense and ordinary, non-philosophical reflection about the nature of morality; not with impersonal quasi-scientific knowledge of the ordinary world, whatever that may be, but with a sophisticated and truthful perception of reality, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what is presented, which comes from a particular, well-known kind of moral discipline rather than just opening one's eyes (Murdoch 1997, 330).

The Characteristics of Ethical Thinking

Therefore, virtue is not found in the ultimate reality of impersonal standards and ideals, but rather in the pursuit, recognition, and understanding of goodness in others. Murdoch contends that the emphasis placed by contemporary philosophers on human choice is insufficient to eliminate selfishness, which is the primary moral conundrum that clouds the moral agent's judgement of others. Murdoch's moral psychology places egoism at the centre of the processes that give rise to human consciousness's images, so it is necessary to sabotage these processes: "an increasing unity and interdependence of the moral world comes with increasing awareness of the 'goods' and the attempt to attend to them purely, without self." (1997, 375). Consequently, virtue is a combination of the sophisticated ability to love and the intricate journey beyond the ego into what Murdoch refers to as "virtuous consciousness."

Even though Murdoch thinks that virtue is the journey beyond the self, reality frequently demonstrates that we are self-centred creatures who daydream in an attempt to find comfort because, as he puts it, "We are anxiety-ridden animals." Our thoughts are always working, creating a curtain that partially hides the outside world and is nervous, often self-preoccupied, and frequently falsifies (1977, 369). According to Murdoch, these kinds of imaginations about who we are and the world we live in cause the ego to grow to the point where it becomes a universe unto itself, keeping us from ever truly understanding other people. Murdoch challenges passive fantasy, but she also values creative imagination since it allows us to create and practise hypothetical scenarios that could expose someone else's reality or distinctiveness. Disrupting our fantasy-beliefs about others through the creative and disciplined use of attention and imagination instead of fantasy becomes important to our aesthetic view of others, leading to a shift of consciousness. 1. Given these factors, it is not unexpected that Murdoch believes that knowing the good requires acquiring unselfishness, as he states that "human beings are not naturally objective or selfless." The obese, obstinate ego is the adversary of the moral existence (1997, 341-342).



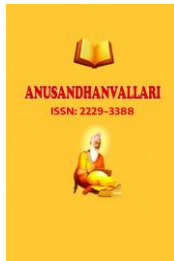
According to Murdoch, developing clarity of vision as a prerequisite for virtue-consciousness is the core moral issue. Then, virtue emerges via a difficult procedure known as "unselfing." . Knowing the good brings about a change in perspective, from seeing the external behaviour of others to developing one's own inner life of moral consciousness, from will to awareness, from external behaviour to internal awareness. According to Murdoch, vision or sight is the main moral capacity that allows one to know what is good. Her response to the question of what virtue is establishes value in reality. We initially perceive the good via a sophisticated moral lens. We must first comprehend what the good is since virtue is essentially "unselfing" by knowledge of the good. For Murdoch, the actuality of goodness is based on a reflective and linguistic turn with regard to her explanation of consciousness, rather than an epistemology that holds that the good is immediately perceived by reason (as in Plato's view).

For Murdoch, the good is now absolute and actual rather than relative and optional; therefore it can no longer be connected to free will as in the Aristotelian tradition. Murdoch subscribes to the cognitivist view that goodness is a knowledgeable being. For her, the actual world is where the good must connect. Furthermore, what is true must also be genuine. Unlike Plato's perspective, this relationship is not predicated on the assumption of a supersensible universe of forms. Murdoch connects the idea of value to human existence in its whole by connecting the good with what is actually means. Since the good is the foundation and background of all existence, it is the aspect under which all human life is lived. Since we cannot perceive it, it is indefinable; rather, it helps us see.

The Concept of Excellence

Murdoch is interested in the link between language and reality when he examines the relationship between morality and the good. The concept of the good is inherent in language pertaining to seeking or loving something, and it denotes a quality that transcends the specific referent. As Murdoch (1997) notes, "We may also speak seriously of ordinary things, people, and works of art as being good, although we are also well aware of their imperfections." The essence of Murdoch's conception of virtue as knowledge of the good is the necessity to uphold a conviction in some transcendent and undefinable a priori truths, since concepts exist beyond representation and transcend reality. She contends, "The concept good... is not a mere value tag of the choosing will, and functional and causal uses of 'good' (a good knife, a good fellow) are not indicators of the structure of the concept, as some philosophers have wished to argue" (1997, 376). Rather, Murdoch links the concept of "the idea of perfection" to the good, saying that "the proper seriousness of the term [good] refers us to a perfection which is perhaps never exemplified in the world we know."

According to Murdoch, the transcendent good is related to reality and must be genuine since it functions via the concept of perfection. Since perfection is the ultimate level of achievement, there is a suggested relationship between the notion and all human endeavours. The character of virtue as "unselfing" is closely tied to this perfection criterion. Specific instances of diverse human endeavours serve as examples of the concept of perfection, which aligns with the suitable benchmark of perfection for any given situation. For instance, every diligent teacher strives for this level of excellence because education demands it. As an ideal of perfection, goodness is analogously linked to the endeavour to perceive oneself in relation to others; this practice of perceiving and reacting to the actual world of others cultivates a virtuous consciousness by surmounting the (selfish) ego's propensity to obscure the reality of others. As a result, a basic relationship between morality and awareness is required for moral perception.



Murdoch seeks to reinforce the relationship between morality (value) and knowledge (cognition) by defending the epistemic and cognitive worth of metaphysical ideas. Murdoch's conception of the moral self revolves around this relationship. Murdoch's link between the transcendent good and reality is independent of both the virtue of duty (as Kant holds) and the presence of an understandable universe of Ideas or Forms (as in Plato's perspective). Rather, Murdoch connects ethical consciousness with the transcendent good:

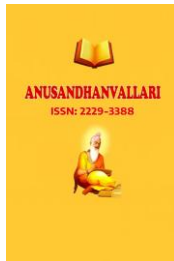
Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the 'unself,' to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness, in the light of the idea of perfection. This is the non-metaphysical meaning of the idea of transcendence to which philosophers have so constantly resorted in their explanations of goodness. 'Good is a transcendent reality,' means that virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is (1997, 375).

Moreover, the notion of perfection as the benchmark for all human endeavours highlights the impartiality of the good. There are two categories of claims concerning human goods: objective and subjective. Subjective assertions base everyone's well-being on their own preferences. In contrast, certain human conditions are objectively excellent for perfectionists like Murdoch. According to her, the evolution of human nature is crucial for ethical investigation since everyone possesses some unique and necessary tendencies that help them become morally flawless. Such tendencies must be taken into account in all ethical undertakings. According to Murdoch, the primary characteristic is the capacity for learning that all people have. Everyone is capable of understanding the concept of goodness and developing virtue. Everybody can therefore undergo moral development and advancement. According to Murdoch, gaining knowledge and developing close relationships are inherently noble and unselfish. As a result, moral virtue emerges as the refined understanding of what is good. In order to bolster this widely held perfectionist belief, Murdoch goes into great detail on the "selflessness" and "pointlessness" of virtue as they are demonstrated in great artistic creations and the lives of modest people.

Murdoch views sin as essentially bad and views virtue as essentially good. Kindness, bravery, love, and so forth improve life; enmity, greed, and gluttony deteriorate it. Murdoch does, however, acknowledge that moral virtue is one of several inherent values and does not imply that virtue is the sole one. The primary criticism of Murdoch's perfectionism is that moral integrity has nothing to do with what people want or need. In other words, her approach, like Kant's, treats any measure of perfection as a categorical imperative rather than a hypothetical one.

Realistic Morality

Murdoch's theory of value is reflected in her explanation of virtue, according to which we understand goodness in terms of qualities that are a part of an on-going process of getting to know others. Her case for the existence of values must be taken into consideration in order to comprehend the nature of the good more fully. Aesthetics is a field that historically assigns value to parts of human experience, such as music, painting, literature, or landscape beauty. However, the value of our lives and the classification of an individual or an activity as right or wrong, just or unjust, belong in a different category: ethics. Murdoch unifies the two domains by acknowledging that individuals often consider moral issues contextually, in terms of tangible interactions with other people, rather than in terms of abstract principles, with the intention of systematising some significant moral experience.



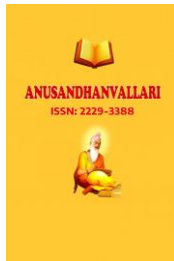
Through their lived experiences, these interactions give people value. Because life is so complicated, an ethically sound perspective on respect for others necessitates primarily perceiving and reflecting on them from an aesthetic standpoint. A primary requirement for such an examination is moral awareness, which demands discipline to fulfil, much as creating and appreciating art takes the same kind of rigorous training. This is what Murdoch says about how virtue develops by awareness of other people's goodness. Value and reality are not logically separate from one another, but this synthesis does not mean that all forms of reductive realism are acceptable. The type of realism that Murdoch develops is not, strictly speaking, the Platonic form of realism that is commonly, if inaccurately, credited to Moore; this is the belief that normative realities are created by us. According to Murdoch, the processes of our minds, a creative use of the imagination, and the patient, selfless application of love and attention make reality normative.

Our capacity to forget oneself, to be directed towards the real, and to see the world justly through love allows us to find worth in it not just in intellectual pursuits but also in the appreciation of art and wilderness. Since the space between our normal dulled consciousness and our comprehension of the actual is collapsed, we utilise our imagination to join the world rather than avoid it, and this unification excites us. Regarding the relationships we have with other people, the same is true. To sum up, Iris Murdoch's realistic morality philosophy is based on the notion that morality is overcoming one's own selfish impulses, seeing the world clearly, and acknowledging the reality of others. It's a moral vision that requires the constant work and moral development and is closely related to qualities like love, humility, and attentiveness. According to Murdoch, morality involves more than simply making decisions; it also involves recognising and acting upon a moral reality that transcends the person.

Unselfing through Love: A Journey toward the Good

According to Murdoch, the main attribute that makes others fully apparent is love. Justice is in the actuality of this love, which accepts others for who they are instead of projecting ideas of what they ought to be. It is in loving others that one is just to them. The aesthetic view of the work of art or the individual must discipline this embracing love, which means letting go of the impulse to own what you see: "What is truly beautiful is 'inaccessible' and cannot be possessed or destroyed" (1997, 348). It is difficult to establish both detachment and aesthetic perception through awareness towards others. However, the contemplation of beauty entails a journey towards transcendence by the power of focused love. For Murdoch, morality is ultimately about seeing goodness through the lens of love. In this understanding of goodness and love, however, realism and the concept of transcendence are strongly associated. Since goodness is specifically immanent in each individual, it cannot be fully understood by conceptions alone. Nonetheless, goodness exists in the person.

Murdoch's work connects the concept of the transcendence of virtue on the one hand with perfection on the other. Perfection is not an unachievable goal, despite its inherent problems; it is only a matter of possibilities for positive change. The ability to love that uplifts us is the source of the potential of transformation that the concept of perfection itself can suggest. The idea of perfection, which structures our conception of how we ought to view the world, is one way that the indefinable good manifests itself. The endeavour to combat delusions stemming from self-serving objectives is known as attention. Virtue becomes selfless when one makes an effort to view others with the same altruism that the artist and the good man do. And the battle to do so occurs at the conscious level, in the mind. Therefore, virtue is the understanding of the Good through the love of others, which enables moral advancement via spiritual conflict. The challenge of achieving the "absolute virtue," as I refer to it—that is, the selfless seeing of others—comes from the blending of the aspects of our experience



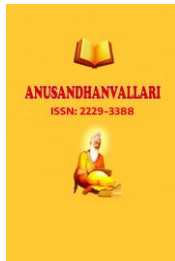
that are due to the peculiarities of our vision and those that represent the true nature of the other person. It takes constant "unselfing" and introspection to even acknowledge the distinction between the two. According to this approach, we shouldn't anticipate that our moral experience would manifest as a pre-packaged observation accompanied by a logical reaction.

Conclusion

This article's central claim is that morality is essentially about caring about other people. According to Murdoch, the development of a moral self and the ability to recognise others for who they truly are depend on the perfection of virtue through aesthetic perception. "I would suggest that the authority of the Good seems to us something necessary because the realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of the self" (1997, 353). This suggests a connection between the good and seeing, as we always act on the good we see or perceive to be so. This view of morality allows for moral development and evolution. As a result, the good—rather than the will—are the essential source of virtue, and appreciating the good is consistent with accurately characterising moral circumstances. Realistic perceptions should have no connection to the individual's interests or goals; rather, their relationships should only be conditional.

Murdoch's explanation that the moral relevance of virtue is solely related to care for others forces us to question the conventional division between what is morally demanded and obligatory and what is, in his view, a "ideal" moral self. According to Murdoch, a morally excellent person's character is such that, when faced with a circumstance that calls for selflessness, his sense of the moral necessity takes precedence over all other considerations, motivating him to behave selflessly. According to Murdoch, a virtuous person does not have to be austere or have their natural cravings for material goods subdued. When morality permits it, the righteous person can enjoy pleasure to the fullest extent possible. But virtue demands a specific moral discipline that, under different circumstances, would reject any alternative path that is inconsistent with what is morally correct. This discipline is acquired via effort. Her sense of what is ethically necessary suppresses her own wants, interests, and desires

Therefore, in Murdoch's view, a righteous person does not ultimately determine that the road of virtue is preferable than the path of evil. Put simply, there is nothing in vice that could balance out virtue. In the same way, self-interest could not be a hindrance to morality. As a result, virtue requires moral self-control and a shift of perspective in order to perceive people more clearly and impartially. Therefore, the foundation of a human's ethical existence is the ability to perceive the good in others. If we have the same conception of virtue as Murdoch, we also appear to be shutting ourselves off from any comprehension of moral failings. Common sense indicates that although individuals are frequently aware of the moral requirements for their behaviour towards others, they are frequently persuaded to break Murdoch's prescribed level of morality by other factors (such as interests, wants, needs, etc.). It appears that there isn't a moral situation in which the moral person, as defined by Murdoch, knows what is proper to do but chooses not to do it. Merely a vague moral awareness leads to transgression. It is significant to note that Murdoch does not downplay the significance of behaving ethically by abiding by moral laws, despite her emphasis on morally seeing others. According to her, morality and facts are intertwined, and acting decently towards others requires having a clear understanding of the circumstances. According to Murdoch, virtue is just a question of perception and a shift in awareness since perception is a way of judgement in and of itself. Thus, the moral self as other-regarding cares for others, especially when they are suffering or fall short of a norm of virtue. It also respects others' qualities.



The assertion that knowledge transcends the concept of the good, however, is one of the complicated aspects of Murdoch's moral virtue theory. As we remember, Murdoch clarifies—how we need to interpret love. We need to communicate the ideas that enable us to feel others' tragedies and victories because we are aware of them. The concept of the good appears to be fundamental in this setting. Without this concept, we are unable to learn about other people. Therefore, the possibility of such knowledge of others is contingent upon the good, which is a universal need.

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