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Wisdom: A Murdochian Perspective



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Introduction

How to become a wise person was once considered to be a crucial philosophical question. In Greece, Persia, the Roman Empire, India, China, and many other ancient civilizations, there was a close affinity between the claim that the reflective life requires knowledge (of the self and the world) and the further claim that knowledge needs to be combined with wisdom. Philosophers, as well as religious and political thinkers, have written countless dialogues, essays, and scholarly treatises about the character of the wise person and the meaning of wisdom. Plato's and Aristotle's contributions are especially well known, but we may also think of the respective accounts of Pyrrho, Al-Fārābī, Nāgārjuna, and Gregory of Nyssa. The possession of knowledge was often thought to be a mark of a wise person; for example, Plato maintained that mathematics would help young people to discover the highest form of wisdom (*Republic*, 522a–527c). Yet, as Socrates demonstrated so vividly, one can also be wise by admitting one's ignorance (*Apology*, 21d). And since true wisdom was often thought of as an attribute of the gods or other supernatural beings, surpassing human capacities and limitations, many ancient thinkers relied on non-naturalistic forms of expression and evaluative outlooks.

In the twentieth century, philosophers in Europe and North America were significantly less interested in the topic of wisdom. Maybe this was due to the concern that living wisely would be recognized as an overly demanding ethical ideal. Under the influence of deontology and consequentialism, philosophers were perhaps eager to stay clear of the larger topic of the good life (including virtues like theoretical and practical wisdom as its essential constituents). Be that as it may, the arrival of virtue ethics on the philosophical scene has changed the debate profoundly. In recent years, a lively debate has emerged in Anglo-American philosophy regarding the idea of wisdom and the nature of the wise person. Contemporary virtue ethicists (e.g., Michael Slote, Christine Swanton, Julia Annas, and Valerie Tiberius) deliberate over the precise characteristics of wisdom and the intricacies of practical and theoretical wisdom. Virtue epistemologists (e.g., Sharon Ryan, Jason Baehr, and Dennis Whitcomb) attempt to determine the precise relation between wisdom and knowledge, and to define how possessing

(moral) knowledge relates to living well or wisely; they have come to define wisdom in terms of epistemic humility, epistemic accuracy, knowledge, or rationality. These debates about the nature of wisdom and its relation to knowledge have become increasingly specialized.

On a closer look, these recent developments are surprising. Because it is often difficult to point to the specific, observable, and characteristic activities of a wise person, wisdom is unlike other virtues, such as kindness and temperance, where the traits in question attach to the specific actions of individuals. Normally, whenever we try to visualize someone who is wise, we think of our grandparents, teachers, or figures like Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela, who have demonstrated emotional persistence through adversity. But on further scrutiny, it is not entirely clear why we ascribe to them not merely the virtues of persistence and openness but also wisdom. It is often difficult to identify one specific action in an individual's life that expresses the virtue of wisdom. We may want to say that Mother Teresa's wisdom consists in having performed numerous acts that demonstrate compassion and deep insight into the nature of human suffering; however, skeptics will immediately raise the objection that ultimate wisdom should not be measured in terms of achievements or, even worse, in terms of lifetime achievement awards. (Some critics have gone so far as to question Mother Teresa's personal motivations as well as her political affiliations.)¹ Wisdom seems to be linked to the sort of deep understanding that only comes from hardship, even suffering. But why should we then think of wisdom as the product of epistemic or intellectual efforts at all? Certainly, reflection plays a role in shaping the goals of the wise person; but there is, arguably, a deeper, more fundamental set of value commitments, which guide the wise person's actions.

Finally, it is not clear at all whether professional philosophers have a better grasp on the question of how to be wise than ordinary people do. Academics may possess the ability to *define* the meaning of the word "wisdom" and to *determine* the conditions of its use by means of conceptual language. However, it is difficult to see why this ability should be considered to be necessary for the acquisition of wisdom. Neither Mother Teresa nor Nelson Mandela ever studied philosophy in an academic setting (nor did Confucius, the Buddha, or Tolstoy). While theories about the nature of wisdom undoubtedly can help us to become wiser, they may also mislead theorists into becoming overly confident in their intellectual abilities. In light of this, I believe that an observation made a long time ago by Stanley Godlovitch still holds true:

Wisdom sits alone. We cannot rehearse or practice it. We cannot be prompted to assume it—whether for our sake or for the sake of others. We cannot expect, should we be in possession of it, to win friends and influence people. Wisdom calls into prominence a state of mind rather than a readiness to act in specified ways. As such, its status as a virtue must remain rather aloof.²

Given that matters are complicated, we have reason to be open to all kinds of contributions, from different fields and perspectives. While the above-mentioned theoretical accounts certainly do have their merits, we also need alternative pictures of wisdom that make us more sensitive to the pitfalls of academic theorizing. It is for this reason that I now want to move on to a closer analysis of Iris Murdoch's (1919–1999) account of wisdom.

Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy

In her writings, Murdoch articulates a peculiar philosophical outlook that is informed by the developments of mid- and late-twentieth-century philosophical thought. In her youth, she was a student of Ludwig Wittgenstein and later wrote a very insightful monograph on Jean-Paul Sartre. Unlike most of Wittgenstein's Anglo-American followers, Murdoch investigated the branch of metaphysical thinking that focuses on the nature of "the Good" and considered religious questions to be indispensable for ethical inquiry. She not only consciously kept her distance from the academic moral philosophy of the times, but also directly challenged a number of its basic assumptions. More specifically, Murdoch was deeply distressed about the ethical inarticulacy and disorientation of modern human beings living in a disenchanted world. Under the influence of naturalistic accounts of self and world, many simply do not have the conceptual and linguistic resources to find things valuable and to experience and appreciate true value (be it moral or aesthetic).³

In accordance with philosophers like Elisabeth Anscombe, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Bernard Williams, Murdoch wanted to recover the depth and coherence in our ethical thinking by turning back to ancient Greek philosophy. In her view, the substantive content of morality cannot be captured in the form of general principles that specify what kinds of action are morally required in particular situations. In this respect, Murdoch criticizes modern thinkers like Immanuel Kant and R. M. Hare, who develop comprehensive accounts of deliberation and choice, according to which rationality must make inferences from a general description of circumstances (identified by means of principles like "You shall not lie") to specific, discrete actions. To adopt the modern view, Murdoch thinks, is to misunderstand the nature of value. At the core of her philosophical project is thus a revised version of the Platonic account of "the Good": goodness is not a function of the activities of choice or deliberation, but a real object of knowledge. While we cannot directly experience "the Good," we nevertheless learn to distinguish, over the course of our lives, gradations of good and bad, better and worse. Like Plato, Murdoch also maintains that, as human beings, we engage in a wide range of activities with the objective of reaching excellence (these activities include, in particular, the creation and admiration of great art). This process allows us to perceive certain evaluative

standards, which reflect the reality of “the Good.” To use her own words, morality is not about singular acts of will, but rather about “a slow shift of attachments wherein *looking* (concentrating, attending, attentive discipline) is a source of divine (purified) energy” (Murdoch [1992] 2003, p. 25). Accordingly, moral value is not located in our intentions to act, but in a deepened appreciation and understanding of the world.⁴

More could be said about the details of her account. We may assume that Murdoch’s understanding of wisdom is the direct corollary of her Neoplatonic understanding of value; yet, this issue is far beyond the scope of this essay.⁵ For the sake of argument, I shall now focus on her understanding of wisdom. Murdoch was clearly occupied with the question of how we can become wiser. She often refers positively to the Socratic and Platonic conception of wisdom and connects it with attention, and connects the latter to love. To give a particularly telling example, in the very first pages of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch quotes from Plato’s *Phaedrus*, in which the Greek philosopher analyzes the relation between wisdom and love as follows: “Sight is the clearest of our physical senses, though it is unable to perceive wisdom. Wisdom would arouse the most frenzied and passionate love if any clear perception of it could come to us through sight. . . . Only beauty has the special role of being perceived” (Murdoch [1992] 2003, p. 15; cf. *Phaedrus*, 250d).⁶

Murdoch is neither a historian of philosophy nor, strictly speaking, a Platonist; she uses Plato for her own purposes, namely to draw our attention to the intricate relation between moral growth and perception. In our daily lives, we need virtues like courage, kindness, and generosity to help us combat egoism and the darker forces of human nature. When she writes about the relation between goodness and love, Murdoch speaks of love as a reaction to the former’s “magnetism” and goes on to claim that because Eros “lacks goodness and beauty, he is a lover who is forever seeking these, he desires wisdom which is supremely beautiful, he is a creative spirit, he is tension, exertion, zeal” (Murdoch [1992] 2003, p. 343).

Murdoch is constantly gesturing toward the ideal of wisdom. For example, in a passage from her lecture “The Fire and the Sun,” she echoes Plato: “Wisdom is *there*, but belongs to gods and very few mortals (*Timaeus, Laws*)” (Murdoch 1997, p. 446). In the same lecture she apparently even endorses Plato’s assertion (in the *Meno*) that “wisdom comes to us somehow ‘by divine dispensation’ (θεία μοῖρα, 100 B)” (Murdoch 1997, p. 407).

Finally, since for Murdoch art provides an occasion for overcoming our selfish tendencies through both its creation and its enjoyment, in another dialogue she says through her protagonist, Acostos, “good art is deep wise thinking,” and again, “good art is wisdom and truth” (Murdoch 1997, pp. 472, 473).

All this does not tell us much about the nature and the internal requirements of the virtue of wisdom. In fact, we have reason to believe that

Murdoch, at one point in her career, consciously decided against giving a comprehensive, theoretical account of wisdom. She apparently considers wisdom to be a direct challenge to any attempt at codifying our moral experience, since wisdom cannot be expressed adequately in language. “As Plato observes at the end of the *Phaedrus*,” she writes, “words themselves do not contain wisdom. Words said to particular individuals at particular times may occasion wisdom” (Murdoch [1970] 2001, p. 31). It is extremely difficult to achieve real wisdom, because wisdom, the first among the four virtues to be realized in Plato’s ideal city (see *Republic*, 428b–e), cannot be put simply in words. Of course we can repeat ancient formulations like “Know thyself!” (γνῶθι σεαυτόν) or “Live in obscurity!” (λάθε βιώσασζ), once considered to be essential guideposts on the road to wisdom. Yet even fools are capable of uttering wise maxims. We can never be sure that we will be able to avoid clichés. The meaning of words may be misunderstood by the listener or rejected as hackneyed without further connection to one’s own life. As the Australian philosopher Raimond Gaita puts it, words can become “dead to us,” unless we are able to use them as part of an “authentic and authoritative response” (Gaita [1991] 2004, pp. 139, 225). Consider also the fact that philosophical arguments about wisdom take place in particular social contexts, especially in academic settings like classrooms, libraries, and lecture halls. Students of philosophy may have a clear understanding of Aristotle’s notions of practical and theoretical wisdom; yet, outside these contexts, most people will find it difficult to understand the details of Aristotle’s account (one argument may be understood correctly, but another may be completely distorted).⁷ Wise words need to be embedded in local contexts, to be spoken and to be listened to with an appropriate attitude—otherwise they easily provoke laughter.

The Example of M and D

In her most famous philosophical paper, “The Idea of Perfection” (first published in 1964), Murdoch provides us with many more clues for how to integrate ancient conceptions of wisdom into modern life. This very dense, notoriously difficult essay contains a carefully constructed example, or, in Murdoch’s words, an “object which we can all more or less see, and to which we can from time to time refer” (Murdoch [1970] 2001, p. 16). This example is supposed to illustrate the change of vision that is at the core of Murdoch’s understanding of moral perfection and wisdom. It is noteworthy that M, the mother-in-law, behaves correctly towards D, her daughter-in-law, throughout, before and after her change. At first, M “feels hostility to her daughter-in-law,” and

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.

Time, though, does not stand still. M comes to realize that she may have misjudged D. Due to her being "an intelligent well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object, which confronts her," M decides to look at D once again, with fresh eyes. Thus,

D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on.⁸

Since, Murdoch suggests, both women do not actually meet each other and there is no reason to expect they will do so in the near future, M's inner change will not lead to any sort of outward action at all. In fact, M's change is achieved purely *via introspection*: M focuses on the introspectively manifest aspects of D's character, namely by remembering past encounters with her daughter-in-law. (In order to make her point, Murdoch even entertains the possibility that D might actually be dead [Murdoch (1970) 2001, p. 17].)

The example of M and D has provoked an astonishing array of different interpretations by theorists in fields as divergent as virtue ethics, moral particularism, and narrative theology.⁹ The debate about moral perception, triggered by, among other things, Murdoch's intervention, has become increasingly specialized, having moved to fields like moral psychology, epistemology, and the cognitive sciences (see, e.g., Blum 1994, Audi 2013, and Gantman and Van Bavel 2015). In this example, Murdoch clearly interprets the ethical ideal of perfection as the wise person's ability to perceive the salient features of morally meaningful situations correctly. In other words, she conceives of wisdom as essentially linked to perception. In Christine Swanton's words, "when through greater wisdom and love you see someone in a new light, thinking of her as 'gay', 'refreshingly simple', 'spontaneous', 'delightfully youthful', rather than 'bumptious', 'vulgar', 'undignified', and 'tiresomely juvenile', you are 'acting' morally" (Swanton 2003, p. 52). Thus, receptivity and appreciation lead to wisdom and love, whereas egotism, laziness, and bad temper may render someone incapable of seeing what the virtuous person sees.

This sounds quite commonsensical, which is not coincidental: Murdoch emphasizes that moral philosophers, in their almost unrestricted willingness to construct elaborate theories and to create technical languages, often actually move away from ordinary existence and real moral issues (e.g., Murdoch [1970] 2001, pp. 1–2). Murdoch thus prefers the description and clarification of moral issues through a combination of conceptual and

metaphorical language.¹⁰ And it is actually extremely difficult to achieve a shift like the above-described change in M's perception. As said before, while it may be rather easy to *define* the meaning of the word "wisdom" and to *determine* the conditions of its use by means of conceptual language in an academic setting, it is much more challenging to actually speak or act wisely in a particular situation in the real world. The story about Thales, who fell into a well while gazing at the stars, is well known (as recorded in Plato's *Theaetetus*, 174a). The ethics professor who advised his students to be altruistic and to develop an impartial concern for all sentient beings, but made a fool of himself (and his ideas) by spending substantial sums of money on the health care for his Alzheimer's-stricken mother, is an intriguing anecdote from our times (cf. Berkowitz 2000). One can hardly call such a person wise.

At this juncture, it will be helpful to contrast Murdoch's approach to wisdom with Valerie Tiberius' more recent account, *The Reflective Life: Living Wisely with Our Limits* (Tiberius 2008), which arguably represents one of the most sophisticated attempts to re-articulate the ancient ideal of wisdom in the present. Tiberius' project takes as its point of departure the intuition that human beings, when asked how they want to live life, aim at very different targets. Some may desire a happy life, some desire a life of pleasure, others even desire a life of greatness. Tiberius argues that since few people are able to agree about what it means to live life well, philosophers should develop an account of wisdom that addresses the first-person point of view directly, instead of an impersonal, goal-based account. Basing her claim on both phenomenal evidence and philosophical insight, Tiberius argues that we can legitimately take reflection as a guide for answering the question, "How should I live?" (It is, indeed, hard to conceive of someone who totally lacks the ability to reflect but who is still considered to be wise.)

According to her "Reflective Wisdom Account," there are at least four virtues that help to constitute reflective wisdom, while also limiting the use of reason: (a) the virtue of perspective, that is, the ability to bring one's actions and feelings into line with one's value commitments (i.e., we need to have a sense of what is worth worrying about); (b) attentional flexibility, that is, the ability to reflect about the good life and to know when it is better to experience life without reflection (i.e., we need to be receptive to the reasons and values of wisdom without engaging in that type of reflection that would seek justification); (c) the virtue of self-awareness, that is, the knowledge about features of oneself that are relevant to one's value commitments and one's conception of a good life (i.e., we need not know *everything* about ourselves, for this would only distract us from what really matters to us—we only need "moderate self-awareness"); and (d) optimism, that is, the ability to be at the same time realistic and hopeful (Tiberius 2008, pp. 7–8).

Murdoch's account of wisdom as being essentially linked to moral perception shares quite a few elements with Tiberius' account, but also differs in fundamental respects. Both philosophers are opposed to the idea that we may find a universally valid answer to the question of how to live wisely; therefore, both claim to take seriously the contextual nature of wisdom and attribute importance to the first-person perspective. There is a striking difference, however. Murdoch goes much further than Tiberius in acknowledging the *limitations* of reflection and rational control. Instead of seeking to improve her life in accordance with the requirements of reason, M simply ponders her memories of D while trying to see her anew. Also, M does not engage in an act of forward-looking deliberation about goals or ends, since the situation described simply is not a situation where she needs to act. Although she does not abandon the language of rational willing entirely, M nevertheless seeks to articulate these insights in a new language of passivity and stillness (by including terms like "seeing," "watching," "attending," "receiving," "having a loving gaze," "being obedient," etc.). M's "loving attention" resembles Tiberius' virtues of (b) attentional flexibility and (c) self-awareness, yet the essentially retrospective orientation of M's activity undermines Tiberius' emphasis on the future-oriented nature of the human quest for wisdom.

Let us now have a closer look at Murdoch's conception of moral change and how it relates to her Platonist idea of wisdom. As far as I can see, there are two aspects that need to be elaborated upon: the issue of temporal depth and the essentially contemplative nature of wisdom.

Wisdom and Temporal Depth

Philosophers often speak of wisdom as a form of knowledge, but they seldom notice that they thereby overlook an essential feature of wisdom: its intricate relation to time and temporal depth. We cannot just decide to become wise by reading a manual or academic paper about wisdom; it takes quite some time and experience before we can even grasp in a basic sense by what means we might eventually become wiser. A person who thinks of herself as honest and well-intentioned may have to go through a long and difficult marriage in order to understand that, in reality, she has a sadistic and mean character (and wisdom would consist in admitting as much to herself).

To come back to Murdoch's example, M's change of vision is more than a mere momentaneous shift of attention. It supposedly happens over a long period of time (the "progressing life of a person" [Murdoch [1970] 2001, p. 25]). It is difficult to acquire a deepened understanding of other persons' characters, in the same sense that it is difficult to acquire a deepened understanding of the virtues (especially wisdom). As Raimond Gaita points out, "such understanding does not deepen towards an epistemic result, a

system of true propositions which could, in principle, be granted to an ideal epistemic being in a flash" (Gaita [1991] 2004, p. 266). We may assume that M's inability to perceive D correctly is the result of her narrow-mindedness, perhaps even of envy, and she may already have told herself that she should be more generous and more caring. Yet, simply saying so does not make it so! Human beings are complicated creatures who, all too often, hide things from their conscious attention by self-deception. Murdoch quotes Franz Kafka: "There is an end, but no way, what we call the way is vacillation" (Murdoch 2003, p. 501). This statement, which at first sight seems paradoxical, reveals an important fact about human lives, namely that we often cannot flatly say whether the difficulties we discover on our path to self-improvement are real or imaginary (the result of rationalization). We often need time to see clearly; but then, the longer we live, the more we risk getting entrapped by our wrong self-conceptions. Sometimes unanticipated experiences give us good reason to change our perspective. And, in M's case, we can imagine that only a great deal of suffering will let the mother-in-law overcome her snobbish attitude toward D.

In more philosophical terms, we have reason to believe that M's change is not a result of a rational choice between, say, moral and non-moral values. It does not even take place on the level of beliefs, but on the deeper level of M's attitudes and emotions. The broader thrust of Murdoch's argument strongly suggests that M's "internal struggle" is happening to a large extent without reflective awareness. M is closely linked to the absent D through their love of a third person (M's son), and yet the reality of this deep bond is beyond the reach of her reflective judgment (informed by her conception of the good life or well-being) and appears to shape her behavior "silently," that is, when M is not consciously aware of D's character but is, instead, engaged in attending to the world.¹¹ By contrast, it may already be *too late* by the time she consciously decides to revise her understanding of D. (Compare this with how only Albertine's disappearance makes the narrator of Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* realize how deeply in love he is.) While describing the "work of attention," Murdoch points out "how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us" (Murdoch 2003, p. 36). Moreover, as has often been noted, M's activity of "brood[ing]" (Murdoch [1970] 2001, p. 19) is necessarily removed from dialogical and public language—in Murdoch's own words: "Moral activity 'shows itself' and is essentially solitary and silent" (Murdoch 2003, p. 315).¹²

If we reflect on the empirical evidence provided in the example, we may become skeptical that M's introspection will lead her onto the correct path of wisdom. Introspection is often unreliable, and M may merely be fabricating stories about D that don't fit her real daughter-in-law at all. Furthermore, from a metaethical perspective one may wonder whether it can be rightly assumed that we can learn about moral values via

introspection (see [Horgan and Timmons 2008](#)). This said, acquiring self-knowledge has traditionally been considered to be a necessary condition for wisdom (Socrates clearly thought so), and we have no reason to doubt this claim. As Valerie Tiberius amply demonstrates in her discussion of the virtue of self-awareness, self-examination helps us to discover our real motivations and to see ourselves from a third-person perspective, so that we are in a better position to respect others' emotions and needs and to know our own limitations ([Tiberius 2008](#), pp. 109–136). Admittedly, introspection is not the only way to acquire self-knowledge; through conversations with friends we may discover more about ourselves than we ever expected. Yet, the *meaning* of those insights still needs to be interpreted from our own perspective, and this indeed often happens when we are alone, silently examining our innermost thoughts.

It is thus also not difficult to see how Murdoch's opposition to modern ethical thinking has shaped her thinking about wisdom and love—and why modern societies are putting too many obstacles in our way when we aspire to become wiser (the quest for efficiency may be the biggest obstacle). Many modern philosophers, under the influence of ideas like autonomy and rational control, share a rather optimistic view of the rational, reflective self; under the influence of Immanuel Kant's picture of the moral, autonomous agent, they first conceive of an ideal, perfectly rational point of view and then assume that it would be best for us to choose whatever appears to be the most rational from such a point of view. To be moral is thought to be the same as acting under the authority of rational principles. The individual who finds herself in a particular situation is supposed to first come up with a maxim, that is, a generic description of a proposed action, her purpose, and the circumstances (something like "In order to fulfill purpose P, I am to do action A in circumstance C"). The goal is then to use a rational procedure (i. e., the categorical imperative) to verify whether this maxim is morally permissible. Once we uncover the right maxim by means of reason, we are obliged to follow it. Murdoch, however, is deeply skeptical of whether Kant's picture can fully capture our moral experience (see in particular [Trampota 2003](#), pp. 147–180). In her articles "Vision and Choice" and "The Idea of Perfection," Murdoch emphasizes that our thinking about morality and moral value should not be focused on singular decisions and discrete actions, but rather on the continuity of executive and non-executive aspects of our moral experience. Often we choose in the morally required way because we have come to see the situation in the right way. Describing and assessing the reality of another person's character involves thick moral concepts, and the content of our descriptions is progressively determined over time.

These are complicated issues. Philosophers like Raimond Gaita and Talbot Brewer have worked out more nuanced versions of the kind of perfectionist ethics proposed by Murdoch (see [Gaita \[1991\] 2004](#) and

Brewer 2009). Regarding our topic of wisdom, it should be clear by now that the process of becoming a wise person is not simply a matter of deciding in the present moment to be wise. While it is important and certainly helpful to occasionally ask questions like “How can I become wise?” or “What is the best way of becoming a wise person?” there is no way of immediately getting an answer. Thinking of ways to improve my reflection may also not help much; it may be better to be patient, to wait and to observe the world more closely. Moreover, just as M can never be certain that she has rightly captured D’s character in words, one can never be certain that one is wise in the here and now. Similarly, in general it is a sign of wisdom to be extremely cautious when ascribing wisdom to a specific individual. By contrast, the excessive trust in rational capacities may mislead us into believing that we are already wise or have acquired knowledge about wisdom, which, in our interactions with others, may make us uncompassionate or blind. Therefore, to sum up, the quest for wisdom is essentially *processual* (i.e., no singular action, but only the stream of life can manifest wisdom) and *only partially reflective* (i.e., experience and mental absorption often give more satisfying answers than mere reflection).¹³

Wisdom, Love, and Contemplation

More than any other twentieth-century moral philosopher, Murdoch has thought deeply about love. On the one hand, love can be a source of self-delusion; on the other hand, however, it can lead to the genuine acknowledgment of the other person’s otherness. Moreover, as the quotation above from Christine Swanton suggests, love and wisdom are deeply intertwined in Murdoch’s thinking. Murdoch believes that our moral experience is characterized in the following way: when we pay close attention to the otherness of another person, we experience the gradual growth of love and wisdom. Yet, her famous formulation “a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality” (Murdoch [1970] 2001, p. 33; cf. Snow 2005) implies a quite peculiar form of love, namely contemplative or detached love. What, then, is Murdochian love?

Modern philosophers have often expressed the worry that love, albeit a natural human tendency, is irrational and contingent, since it represents a form of valuing individuals *as individuals*. Philosophers worry that because we cannot always adequately uncover the reasoning process behind why we love a particular person (after all, reasons are general, but the loved one is irreplaceable), the nature of love itself is irrational. By contrast, Murdoch has illuminated in both her novels and philosophical writings the various ways in which love (including erotic love) constitutes the most basic features of human existence: the perception of beauty, romantic attraction, sexual arousal, fulfillment, lifelong accompaniment, and yet also anxiety, blindness, egoism, and even madness. She has thus demonstrated that a commitment

to valuing the beloved is not wholly inexplicable from a philosophical perspective; individuals (seen under a “loving gaze”) are irreplaceable, but our commitments are not necessarily completely “beyond justification.” Ultimately, Murdoch believes, love will lead us to recognize the importance of the virtues and to develop a substantive conception of the human good.¹⁴

I have already drawn attention to another important feature of the example of M and D, which is that M does not actually “take in” the renewed presence of D, but, instead, withdraws into her private space, “brood[ing]” upon her *past* impressions of D (Murdoch [1970] 2001, p. 19). M merely *remembers* what she had seen in the past. Character traits like “gay,” “refreshingly simple,” “bumptious,” and “vulgar” are understood purely in terms of inner mental events. In fact, Murdoch has often written about the sort of “silent” activity performed by M; one may in particular think of her subtle analysis, in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, of the inner monologue of Maggie Verver, the protagonist in Henry James’ novel *The Golden Bowl*.¹⁵ While Murdoch has often written about (male) individuals left in solitude to write down their love stories, for example in the novels *The Black Prince* and *The Sea, the Sea*, she was certainly aware of the dialogical nature of true love-relations. (It may not be a coincidence that *The Golden Bowl*, a novel she particularly cherished, has been called a paradigm of “dialogical love”; see Krebs 2015, pp. 290–315.) Nevertheless, Murdochian love can be characterized by a certain degree of detachment, manifesting itself in a contemplative attitude.

It is important to understand that Murdoch does not think that, when we love a person, we value the other’s rational will or self. Instead, by loving another person and contemplatively “looking” at her with a “loving gaze,” we merely discover idiosyncratic traits that we cannot easily subsume under standardized concepts of virtuous or non-virtuous character traits.¹⁶ David Velleman explains love, in the spirit of Iris Murdoch, as “an arresting awareness of value in a person” (Velleman 1999, p. 362). He thereby claims that to love a person is to value this person. According to Velleman, love involves a characteristic form of openness to the concrete person, in which one suspends the normal mechanisms of emotional self-protection from the other person and expects to be loved and to be valued. Similarly, Murdoch directs us to understand love primarily as an activity of valuing the individual, an activity that, at the same time, helps us to come to terms with our own value commitments. And the loving dimension of M’s activity is manifested precisely by her willingness to revise her descriptions of D’s character constantly and never to consider one particular description as final. This willingness reveals the almost infinite perfectibility of her understanding.

It is also worth emphasizing that, although Murdoch sometimes calls herself a Platonist, plausible interpretations of her thinking distance Murdoch from metaphysical claims about the eternal soul or the ideas.¹⁷ An

individual possesses a particular identity, and when we love another person we certainly do place value on her unique personal identity (enduring through changes of her characteristic traits). And yet it is extremely difficult to say what such personal identity actually is beyond the changing cluster of characteristics we ascribe to a loved one. Philosophers have debated the relation between love and personal identity for a very long time (see, e.g., [Rorty 1986](#), [Frankfurt 1999](#), and [Grau 2010](#)). Murdoch's contribution to this debate is not systematic or metaphysical, but is instead pragmatic. She focuses on the notion that the beloved has certain characteristic properties, but that our love for the beloved cannot be reduced to a description of these properties. The object of our love is contingent (with a particular origin and causal history), but nevertheless our attachment is not merely non-rational and ungrounded, but can become the "source of reasons" ([Grau 2010](#), p. 268) when we aspire to achieve true goodness. Love, beyond all selfish fantasies, actually helps us to understand ourselves better and helps us to deepen our understanding and appreciation of the other. We acknowledge the other's flaws and virtues and are able to give our undistracted attention. In the process of loving another person, our self-concern progressively fades away, and then a genuine sense of concern for the other emerges in its place. We need to be radically open to the complexity of the world and thus be constantly willing to reassess our value commitments. This is, I want to argue, the core of Murdoch's famous ideal of "unselfing."

I have said before that, for Murdoch, wisdom is the ability to perceive the salient features of morally meaningful situations correctly. We are now in a better situation to understand this statement; taking seriously what Murdoch says about love and wisdom, we have reason to believe that wisdom is a much more complicated and perplexing phenomenon than we might normally assume. The ability to perceive the salient features of morally meaningful situations correctly is merely a first step on the way toward genuine wisdom. To be a wise person implies that one is deeply attached to others but at the same time is able to look back at the emotions one felt when actually confronted with others. One is able to distance oneself from one's former self; yet, at the same time, one is also aware of the contingency of all commitments (to other people, to certain places and activities) and that it is not possible to give the sort of ultimate justification that so many of us crave. Thus, to be a wise person not only implies that one is able to perceive the salient features of morally meaningful situations correctly, but also that one is willing to see "the world as from no place within it" ([Gaita \[1991\] 2004](#), p. 211). How I understand the identity of others (through love and other deep attachments) is tied to my sense of uniqueness *in my world*. And yet I must also bracket this sense of uniqueness and attempt to view my value commitments through the ideals and aspirations of others. Only by doing this can I hope to achieve a true concern for others and live wisely. Finally, as the example of M and D

demonstrates, if we accept that moral activity necessarily contains a descriptive and imaginary dimension, we will also understand why it is not a coincidence that genuine wisdom possesses a *backward-looking* element.¹⁸

Older people are rightly thought to have easier access to wisdom, since they have had so many experiences in their past to ponder and since they are less likely to live under the illusion of future achievements. In order to live wisely, I have to take into account the diverse and contingent elements of the other's personality, history, and life plan; but I can only do this after having interacted with another person for quite a long time, even over the course of a whole lifetime. It seems as if life itself often provides us with a sort of immediate or non-inferential moral knowledge. For example, many consider it wise to accept the limitations of age and the changing requirements of different stages of a person's life, for the natural sequence of life stages represents an order that we cannot change through acts of will (cf. [Siep 2004](#), p. 253). Yet it is very difficult to explain these limitations and requirements to younger people. We should also add that in our age of consumerism and immediate gratification it is difficult for many of us to understand why negative emotions and even suffering are indispensable conditions for achieving a deeper change of vision and for directing oneself onto the path to wisdom. As Michael S. [Brady \(2019\)](#) has rightly pointed out, securing our lives against all sorts of negative emotions and dangers is not the way to grow morally, let alone to become wise.

Conclusion

To engage with these kinds of questions is not primarily a theoretical endeavor, at least not in the traditional sense. Murdoch does not provide us with a *theory* of wisdom, but with an everyday, non-theoretical understanding of how to be wise. Her account does contain numerous theoretical assumptions, yet what she really wants to achieve is a change in our way of understanding ourselves through a different use of ordinary language. Murdoch thinks that philosophers need to be sensitive to the ways they actually speak, especially when they want to say definite things about wisdom ("words themselves do not contain wisdom. Words said to particular individuals at particular times may occasion wisdom"). For this purpose, we may even need to abstain from certain philosophical moves. If we have understood the requirements of living wisely, we may not be tempted any longer to ask for justifications, since living wisely often implies that one is concerned with very basic commitments and concerns in the lives of human beings, where attempts at justification are neither necessary nor desirable (cf. [Tugendhat 2007](#), p. 31). This is precisely why many people who seek some sort of insight or wisdom often prefer to read a novel by Tolstoy or Dostoevsky rather than to study the newest academic publication about wisdom: a well-written plot from the nineteenth century

can help us to gain perspective, since its content often happens to be more directly connected to our most inner concerns than much contemporary theorizing.¹⁹ And this may also explain why so many people today are interested in Buddhism and meditative practices that often challenge cultural beliefs common in Western societies. (Murdoch had a long-standing interest in Zen Buddhism, and her “Wittgensteinian-Platonist” version of pragmatism, I think, can help us to understand better the meaning of Buddhist practices for modern, secular societies.)

And one may add another final thought: a wise person will sometimes actively help others and try to alleviate their suffering; yet, in times when so many are frantically trying to bring about better states of affairs, thereby often doing more harm than good, wisdom may simply consist in doing less and inspiring other people through one’s thoughtful silence.

Notes

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- 1 – As the journalist Christopher Hitchens has done; see [Hitchens \(1995\) 2012](#). We should be careful whom we place on a pedestal.
- 2 – See [Godlovich \(1981\) 1989](#), p. 279.
- 3 – Murdoch frequently expressed the belief that, in the modern age, human beings have suffered a dramatic loss of concepts and ideas (see, e.g., [Murdoch \[1992\] 2003](#), pp. 6–7, 84–85, 197–198; cf. [Forsberg 2015](#), pp. 211–219). More recently, Matthew B. Crawford has published a cultural critique of contemporary Western society; according to him, the modern condition is obsessed with consumerism and immediate gratification, thereby leaving individuals isolated and “bereft of any public language in which to express their intuitions about the better and worse, the noble and shameful, the beautiful and ugly, and *assert them as valid*” ([Crawford 2016](#), p. 184). Crawford cites Murdoch’s texts as an inspiration for his thinking.
- 4 – For a more detailed account of Murdoch’s thinking about goodness see in particular [Antonaccio 2000](#), pp. 115–163. Murdoch’s thinking is multifaceted. While she has often been interpreted as a Neoplatonist, we should be careful not to take her to be committed to a version of

foundationalism (assuming that moral experience can be reduced to, or subjugated under, one single principle or basic concept). Cf. also [Hämäläinen 2014](#) and [Hopwood 2019](#).

- 5 – Roger Crisp has a helpful discussion; see [Crisp 2012](#).
- 6 – Many similar quotations and references can be found in Murdoch's writings, especially in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.
- 7 – This thought is due to Michael Hampe; see [Hampe 2018](#), pp. 213–214.
- 8 – [Murdoch \(1970\) 2001](#), pp. 16–17.
- 9 – For a detailed analysis of the entire paper, “The Idea of Perfection,” see [Broackes 2012](#), pp. 38–50.
- 10 – Cf. [Hämäläinen 2014](#), pp. 218–219.
- 11 – There can be no doubt that the idea of “the Good” is central to Murdoch's thinking, yet it is not operative on the level of judgments, but located deeper in human consciousness or indexed to a personal vision. Maria Antonaccio puts it this way: “Access to the good is never direct or unmediated but must pass through the ambiguous and conflicting energies of human subjectivity” ([Antonaccio 2000](#), p. 130).
- 12 – Elijah Millgram speaks of Murdoch's “idiosyncrasy claim: through the continuous work of attention that can only be done by her alone, M is said to achieve more appropriate descriptions of D; yet, by revising her descriptions, M necessarily moves away from the public world and retreats into her own inner world” ([Millgram 2005](#), p. 181).
- 13 – Carla Bagnoli claims that M's change of vision should be interpreted from a Kantian perspective as the adoption of a new maxim: originally, the maxim that informs M's actions is something like “I will be nice to my daughter-in-law in order to please my son,” or “I will be nice to my daughter-in-law in order to abide by the rules of etiquette, which I was brought up to observe.” After a long process of “brooding,” however, M resolves to endorse the maxim “I will be nice to my daughter-in-law out of respect” ([Bagnoli 2003](#), p. 14). For Kant, a maxim represents a general determination of the will; maxims are practical principles that determine the will through a condition that the agent regards as valid only for her, and actions are directed toward specific ends. In my understanding, Bagnoli fails to take sufficiently into consideration the fact that M does not act in any publicly observable way. It is controversial among Kant scholars whether each action must have a corresponding maxim. This said, I have difficulty, in the absence of action or deliberation about possible ends, in seeing how M should have adopted an alternative maxim. Murdoch's emphasis on the *retrospective* nature of M's activity, I believe, directly

challenges the Kantian perspective. As Talbot Brewer has pointed out, it often is extremely difficult to retrospectively assign a maxim to my past actions; thus, I must resolve myself to the fact that I often cannot say with certainty what my maxim (or another person's maxim) was in a given past situation (Brewer 2002).

- 14 – For an overview of Murdoch's discussion of love see Nussbaum 2012.
- 15 – As Maggie Verver ponders her husband's relationship with her best friend, she slowly realizes that they are having an affair: "Maggie Verver," writes Murdoch, "sitting alone in her room, breathing quietly and biting her lip, is to be imagined as, at intervals, having the experiences indicated by the pagoda image, and at some point reflectively remembering the process" (Murdoch [1992] 2003, p. 264) (The "pagoda image" here refers to a central metaphor in James' extremely fine-grained description of his protagonist's inner life; cf. also Murdoch [1992] 2003, pp. 256–260).
- 16 – For this line of argument see Millgram 2004. Millgram puts it this way: "People tend to look most rational when they are seen superficially and from a distance; the closer and the more attentively (the more lovingly) you look at them, the more quiriness, mechanism, stubbornness, emotional flab, psychological cans of worms, overall flakiness, lack of reflectiveness, inability to track reasons, and inability to appreciate value you will discern" (Millgram 2004, p. 512). One further remark: Murdoch argues that the way an individual sees the world is determined by that individual's character. Her frequent use of ocular metaphors ("seeing," "vision") has been influenced by Wittgenstein's remarks on visual impressions and aspect-perception in his *Philosophical Investigations*. These metaphors easily mislead us into believing that character traits can be *perceived* in binary terms. Yet, nowhere does Murdoch suggest that a causal or empirical account of character would make much sense to her. Compare this with what Garry L. Hagberg writes in his discussion of "retrospective change" in Murdoch: "Coming to see an object as an X or a Y is not reducible to, and not explicable in terms of, the perception of a property intrinsic to that hermetically sealed (i.e., non-relationally embedded) object" (Hagberg 2010, p. 111). Murdoch's account of character can only be reconstructed adequately if we also acknowledge her early engagement with Sartre, who famously views character basically to consist in "a holistic network of projects" (Webber 2009, p. 147). Additionally, Murdoch struggles with questions related to the structure of inner experience widely discussed in post-Wittgensteinian philosophy: is my inner experience of certain mental states (an experience to which I attribute epistemic relevance) necessarily propositionally structured, or

is such inner experience, while still being epistemically relevant, essentially non-propositional? (Cf., e.g., [Bieri 1982](#).)

- 17 – In many of her central philosophical claims, Murdoch relies primarily on Plato, who has often been interpreted as a thinker committed to a number of highly speculative claims about the existence of transcendent ideas. However, a careful reading of Murdoch’s writings will demonstrate that she uses Plato merely for metaphorical purposes (see [Hämäläinen 2014](#)). Also, modern interpretations of Plato no longer view him as the proponent of a genuine “theory” of ideas (see in particular [Wieland \[1982\] 1999](#), pp. 148–149).
- 18 – In my understanding, a “loving gaze” requires some sort of practical wisdom, yet the latter is not identical with practical wisdom in Aristotle’s sense, that is, as the ability for deliberation and decision-making in specific practical contexts. Nancy Snow writes: “Practical wisdom likely comes into play in enabling the mother to distinguish cases in which her evaluation of another person is due to her own shortcomings and emotional distortions and cases in which her evaluation accurately reflects the other person’s failings” ([Snow 2005](#), p. 491).
- 19 – The novel, Murdoch writes suggestively, is “full of holes through which it communicates with life, and life flows in and out of it” ([Murdoch \[1992\] 2003](#), p. 96).

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