

Murdoch's philosophy differs in critical respects from the main approaches to ethics current in her time.

**Logical positivism:** Ethical statements have no meaning beyond an expression of an emotion

**Existentialism** (Sartre) : Humans are free and moral choices are entirely up to each individual

**Analytic philosophy** eg Hare: the moral agent is free to choose their moral values, constrained only by the requirement that the agent prescribe those values universally

.Murdoch rejects the priority of the choosing will in the moral enterprise, the central image of the moral agent as responsible and free

and their rejection of a structure of objective value outside the individual that gives authoritative direction for deciding and choosing. Murdoch finds these views false to our moral experience and to the nature of moral agency.

# Iris Murdoch

(The following is my summary of the article on Murdoch in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

## View of the Self

Murdoch says that the will does not engage in choice out of nowhere, but out of a rich and complex individual psyche formed by ongoing attitudes, perceptions, drives, attachments, beliefs, and modes of attention. This substantial self is in the process of formation, change, and development all the time; and it provides the context for choice

Murdoch says that philosophy should develop a moral or philosophical psychology that provides the terms in which to understand and characterize the substantial self to which she gives center stage, displacing the notion of a freely choosing will

( It somewhat echoed Murdoch's friend Elizabeth Anscombe's similar but more radical and striking charge in her 1958 "Modern Moral Philosophy")

Murdoch takes some steps toward developing such a moral psychology by embracing Freud as the great theorist of the human mind, who

*sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control.* (OGG: 51/341)

This substantial self constrains the will extensively . "The area of [the moral agent's] vaunted freedom of choice is not usually very great" (SGC: 78/364). We cannot easily rid ourselves of pernicious emotions, attachments and motives that work against moral motivation and behaviour. Murdoch adds,

*Introspection reveals only the deep tissue of ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings. (OGG: 51/241)*

She sees the Freudian view as “a realistic and detailed picture of the fallen man” (OGG: 51/241), one of many places where her philosophy is influenced by a Christian worldview, as she fully recognizes. This pessimistic view of the human psyche plays a central role in Murdoch’s thought.

## Moral Reality and Moral Realism

Against the dominant philosophies of the day Murdoch in an objective moral reality that can be known by human persons, and that that reality, or the apprehension of it, motivates us to act morally. She is thus a “moral realist”, “moral objectivist” and “moral cognitivist”

There are three distinct strands within Murdoch’s conception of moral reality—

“other persons”,

“the Good”,

and “metaphysics”.

Murdoch does not pull the three together into an overall systematic view of moral reality.

### Moral reality as other persons

The moral challenge of knowing another person:

The individual person: A central strand in Murdoch’s view is that moral reality is other persons. Murdoch is not thinking of “other persons” as an aggregate, nor primarily as instances of a category. Rather a given moral agent’s moral reality consists in the individual reality of each other person, one at a time.

In this strand, Murdoch emphasizes the complexity and difficulty of apprehending the moral reality in question. She says that we are prone to fantasy and egoism (the “fat, relentless ego” [OGG: 52/342]) that block us from being able to see other persons clearly; from appreciating that they are as real as oneself (SBL 1959/EM: 215); from a lived recognition of their separateness and differentness (OGG: 66/353); and from grasping their true individual character (OGG: 59/348).

Our ego must in a way be silenced—a process she refers to as “**unselfing**” (a concept she draws from Simone Weil’s “*décreation*”)—in order for us to fully grasp reality in this sense.<sup>[3]</sup> Murdoch’s novels frequently portray characters lost in their own world who see others primarily through their own fantasies of them.

But Murdoch also emphasizes a more general contingency and idiosyncrasy of persons, resulting in a general opaqueness of persons to each other, a point apparently independent of the one about fantasy and egoism, though complementing it.

Murdoch thinks grasping the reality of the other comes in degrees, that extend to a “perfect” understanding of another, a state that can be aimed at but not actually attained.

She often speaks of levels of understanding—of persons, concepts, ideas—an idea she increasingly comes to associate with Plato,

The moral challenge of knowing the other differs for each individual agent because each agent encounters different people, but also because the task and challenge of knowing differs for each agent in relation to each other person.

The difficulty of knowing more generally Sometimes Murdoch expresses the “other persons” strand in more general terms—not only individual persons but “individual realities” outside the (agent’s) self. This can include natural objects such as a tree or an individual animal, but also non-animate and conceptual objects such as a language or a subject matter, and also situations.

She sometimes, and increasingly so in *Metaphysics*, sees an appreciation of all of reality in its manifold detail as a crucial form of moral aspiration, and there is evidence in her novels of a special appreciation of natural objects, not only living beings, and not only as beautiful (White 2020). But more frequently Murdoch regards other persons specifically as the content of moral reality.

## Moral reality as Platonic good

A second, and increasingly prominent, strand in Murdoch’s view of moral reality is that it is “The Good”, understood in a Platonic sense.

One element in Murdoch’s Platonism is that something like the form of the Good constitutes what is known when we have moral knowledge, and is also what is sought and loved.

We achieve that understanding through knowing and loving the good in good particular things (including persons but also art, nature and ideas), then ascending to an understanding of Good itself. (Murdoch frequently employs Plato’s “ascending” metaphor [e.g., SGC: 94/377].)

Murdoch also says, attributing it to Plato, that the Good is like a light that enables us to see goodness in particular things (SGC: 93/376).

“A genuine mysteriousness attaches to the idea of goodness and the Good” (SGC: 99/381).

While the Good is an object of both knowledge and love for she does not subscribe to Plato’s view that regards the forms as more real than individual objects and persons who partake of them in the world of experience, nor as inhabiting a transcendent world beyond our world of experience

The Good and other persons are distinct strands in Murdoch’s view of moral reality. But they reinforce each other. “*we love particular individuals in light of the Good, and we love the Good through particular individuals*”

For Murdoch loving and knowing other persons is also not the same as knowing what is distinctly good in them or about them. One can love, and direct loving attention to,

another whose deficiencies and faults she fully recognizes it is the person as a whole that is the proper object of loving attention

. Murdoch acknowledges that the Christian conception of God influences her understanding of the Good. “I shall suggest that God was (or is) a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention” and that we should retain a non-theistic concept [i.e., Good] with those characteristics (OGG: 55/344). This semi-religious dimension relates to the idea Murdoch occasionally expresses, and more so in *Metaphysics*, that **the Good is a source of energy that is not found within our “natural psychology”** (OGG: 71/358).

## Moral reality as metaphysics

A final thread in Murdoch’s view of reality is that it is what metaphysics describes. **She understands metaphysics as an all-encompassing view of a transcendent reality, of the universe, that the individual must then attempt to come to understand in order to work out her place in it (M&E 1957/EM: 70).**

In “Metaphysics and Ethics” she mentions Thomism, Hegelianism, and Marxism as examples. These metaphysical systems and pictures are deeply ethical and evaluative, but, she implies, also provide a broader conception of reality.

**Her evolving moral views always leave room for some kind of transcendent structure beyond the individual that retains ethical authority over the moral agent.**

The Platonic strand of moral reality can of course be seen as exemplifying the metaphysics strand, but the latter remains a more general idea within Murdoch’s complex overall view of moral reality. The “other persons” strand seems less metaphysical and thus contrary to the final strand.

But Murdoch often speaks of the reality of other people in “transcendental” terms—transcending the individual ego—and this framing thereby retains an element important to her complex and shifting understanding of metaphysics. All three strands play a role in Murdoch’s thinking about (moral) reality, but the other persons and the Good are distinctly more prominent.

## Metaphor

. Murdoch often emphasizes the importance of metaphor in thinking, especially in philosophy where, in the analytic tradition, there is an often tacit assumption that any metaphorical use of language can be given a purely literal rendering. Murdoch entirely rejects this way of thinking about language and understanding and often talks of exploring metaphors.

Metaphors are not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models, they are fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition.

The “other persons” strand involves an image of a struggle of each moral agent to grasp the other person(s) in their particular world as distinct persons, as equally real as themselves.

The metaphor of Good involves a reaching to an abstract and implied-to-be “higher” entity.

The metaphor of “metaphysics” generally evokes an elaborated system within which the individual agent is placed. The metaphorical dimension (with the differences among the three) is integral to our understanding of each strand.

## Moral Agency as Inner Activity

Murdoch’s version of moral realism, for an understanding of morality is perhaps her greatest contribution.

We may focus on two such contributions to moral philosophy connected to Murdoch’s moral realism: (A) an expanded conception of moral agency; (B) the notion of a “fabric of ethical being”.

On (A. **She seeks to demonstrate a form of moral agency that takes place solely in the mind of the agent with no expression in her behaviour in the public world.** She does so through an extended example

Murdoch gives the example of a mother-in-law who outwardly acts as though she loves her daughter-in-law but inwardly despises the young woman. She also realizes that she ought to love her daughter-in-law. The mother carries on a dialogue with herself internally: “I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.” She keeps asking herself to reconsider her daughter-in-law, and over time she makes progress; she learns to tolerate and then, eventually, love the woman. And that, for Murdoch, is a significant moral achievement for the mother that doesn’t involve acting at all. She learns to love her daughter-in-law by learning to look at her the right way.

Murdoch sees *M*’s attempts to see *D* as exemplifying activity on *M*’s part, though issuing in no outward behaviour, activity that is moral in character.

**Murdoch concludes that our moral agency is not exhausted by our outward behaviour,** (nor by outward behaviour plus mental acts conceptually tied to outward behaviour, like deciding, choosing, and deliberating.) **And the moral philosophy of her time did not leave any clear place for this purely inner moral activity of attention.**

## The Fabric of Moral Being

(B) Beyond her expansion of moral agency to include inner mental life, Murdoch **proposes the notion of a person’s total moral being,** which transcends agency itself. In discussing *M* she says that her inner mental acts of attention contribute to “a continuous fabric of being” (IP: 22/316) that she says

*“is shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessment of others, their conception of their own life, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny.”*

Murdoch is saying that our thoughts, modes of speech, emotions, imaginings, contemplatings, and the like, are responses to our perceived reality, just as the exercise of moral agency is.

If we are amused by someone making fun of a disabled person, that is part of our moral being; it reflects on us morally. Such responses are part of us, but are not always *doings*, exercisings of agency.

**This metaphor of the fabric of being connects with Murdoch's saying that morality issomething that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. (IP: 37/329)**

Thus she denies that morality consists fundamentally in choice-making in specifiable situations.

We are in a constant state of moral formation, and we bring our fabric of being to (what we experience as) choice situations.

Actions and other responses flow from the background fabric of being that has been constructed by this moral formation.

This metaphor also connects with Murdoch's defence of the moral importance of the inner life, of the individual's consciousness, that is ignored or demoted in the moral philosophy of her time

## 8. Seeing Replaces Doing

Murdoch substitutes *seeing* for *doing* as the core metaphor for human life's most fundamental moral task.

Her influential essay "The Idea of Perfection" is framed as a critique of Stuart Hampshire on this point. She sees Hampshire as articulating the most powerful case for placing action-in-the-world at the core of the moral enterprise.

She suggests an alternative conception that uses a range of visual metaphors such as see, attention, perception, looking, and vision to express the fundamental task of morality.

Her visual metaphors are definitely meant to retain an important place for action in the world, but to place it in a larger context than does Hampshire's "doing" metaphor .

In particular, Murdoch employs "attention" (not entirely consistently) to mark the process by which this successful apprehension of reality—seeing—is brought about.

*I have used the word "attention" which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe " this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the moral agent.*

## 9. Simone Weil

Weil had a profound impact on Murdoch, not only in relation to attention.

Murdoch always makes her debt to Weil evident.

Weil influenced Murdoch's turn to Platonism, and her particular interpretation of Plato. She certainly bolstered the continuing Christian elements in Murdoch's thought, as well

as Murdoch's increasing invoking of mysticism as related to morality, especially in *Metaphysics*.

She probably influenced Murdoch's view of psychic energy (understood on a Freudian model) as "mechanical", something to which we are subjected. And Murdoch made use of Weil's notion of "void" as part her moral outlook in *Metaphysics*.

Weil also developed a quite original critique of Marxism that involved a strong emphasis on the dignity of manual work, an emphasis of Murdoch's also.,.

In 1976 she cited Weil's *Attente de Dieu (Waiting for God)* as one of only three philosophical works that deeply influenced her. (The others are Plato's *Symposium* and Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* [Broackes 2012a: 17, note 42].)

But Weil's strongest influence on Murdoch was in the idea of attention (Weil 1942 [1977]; 1973b). Weil's view of attention had a strong religious dimension. The proper, ultimate object of attention is God, though persons and subject matters are also objects of attention. Weil's notion of attention also involves a kind of passive waiting in readiness for a truth to be revealed, an emptying of oneself in preparation for receiving the object. Murdoch abandoned the religious aspect of Weil's view of attention, as she also abandoned for herself the distinctly theistic aspects of Weil's Christianity, and also adopted a more active conception of attention than Weil. But their notions were otherwise similar.<sup>[5]</sup>

## 10. Murdoch on Attention

For Murdoch, attention involves activity on our part (more so than in Weil), directing the "just and loving gaze upon an individual reality", as *M*'s attempt to see *D* is meant to illustrate. Sometimes Murdoch suggests that seeing someone justly and lovingly is precisely what is involved in seeing them as they really are [IP: 28/321; OGG: 67/354].

But Murdoch does not regard mere accuracy as constituting this just and loving gaze (IP: 23/317). Learning more details about someone (that they like chocolate or are afraid of snakes) is not what attention as loving and just provides (Cordner 2016). Moreover, as illustrated by the character of Julius King in her novel *Fairly Honorable Defeat*, someone can be very perceptive, very tuned into aspects of other people's reality, such as their vanity, and can use this knowledge to manipulate and harm those persons. Julius indeed is incapable of loving others at all, and his perceptiveness might involve accurate, but not just or loving, attention (FHD 1970).

As mentioned earlier, Murdoch thinks that fully recognizing and acknowledging that a given other person is as real as oneself does not come naturally to us. Our fantasies and self-absorption get in the way; getting past these obstacles is difficult and uncertain and constitutes a genuine moral achievement. Attention is the process by which we are potentially enabled to do so.

The "as real as oneself" formulation: Two aspects

1 One is the recognition of the other in her distinct otherness and difference from oneself, rather than in light of one's projections onto the other that assimilate her to oneself.

2 The second is that the other is seen as like oneself, for example as a human being, a person, a possessor of dignity.

Attention is thus a process by which human persons are enabled to access moral reality.

The process is both cognitive and perceptual (Murdoch does not attempt to work out their relationship to one another) but for Murdoch those capacities are also moral in character. Our moral capacities are *part of* our cognitive capacities, enabling, and required for us to see, the moral and evaluative aspects of reality.<sup>[6]</sup>