



THE  
JUBILEE CENTRE  
FOR CHARACTER & VALUES

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

Key Note:  
Helen Widdows

December 2012

*'These are unpublished conference papers given at the inaugural conference of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values, Character and Public Policy: Educating for an Ethical Life, at the University of Birmingham, Friday 14<sup>th</sup> December 2012. These papers are works in progress and should not be cited without author's prior permission.'*



**School of Education  
University of Birmingham  
Edgbaston  
Birmingham**

My questions for today are ‘What is Murdoch’s construction of the ethical life?’; ‘How does this contribute to the goal of helping individuals to become better?’; and ‘Does it offer any insights into what it is to be virtuous and to how virtue can be taught?’. To do this I will first introduce Iris Murdoch’s view of philosophy as a prescriptive and evaluative endeavour; second, consider why it is ‘sight’ not ‘choice’ which matters; third, consider the difficulty of this, and finally consider the implications and insights which can be drawn from this.

This debate is clearly relevant to formal education, but it is also of interest across the private and public spheres and has relevance to ethics and governance in general. At any rate I hope this very particular view of virtue will prove useful in inspiring thinking about the ethical life in general.

### ***Murdoch’s virtue theory***

Iris Murdoch offers a distinctive virtue approach, which like other virtue ethicists draws on ancient philosophy (though Plato rather than Aristotle provides the primary inspiration for her understanding of value – and she regards Plato’s description of the cave as ‘an endlessly instructive image’ (Murdoch, 1992, p399) ). Like both Plato and Aristotle Murdoch conceives of philosophy as a normative rather than descriptive endeavour. She rejects the claim ‘that moral philosophy should aim at being neutral’ (Murdoch, 1970, p52) and regards attempts to claim neutrality and objectivity as pseudo-scientific pretensions. She deems such attempts as destructive of philosophical, particularly moral philosophical, endeavour as:

“Value” becomes difficult to discuss. The area of fact becomes more extensive and more present to us ... Scientific views and methods spread from their proper place in science into peripheral areas. All sorts of theorists (including some philosophers) begin to feel that they must eschew value preferences and discussions of value, and offer themselves as neutral scientific workers. (Murdoch, 1992, p50-51)

Clearly this is not the type of philosophy which the Jubilee Centre – with its focus on character and value – wishes to use in its work, and I suspect Murdoch’s view that philosophy should be prescriptive is closer to the view which is endorsed here. Murdoch’s position is that, ‘ethical theory has affected society, and has reached as far as to the ordinary man, in the past, and there is no good reason to think that it cannot do so in the future’ (Murdoch, 1970, p76). Taking this line then “ethics should not merely be an analysis of ordinary mediocre conduct, it should be a hypothesis about good conduct and about how this can be achieved. How can we make ourselves better?” (Murdoch, 1970a, p78).

And it is this question – of how we can make ourselves better, and presumably by extension teach others to become better, that I want to discuss today. Becoming better, learning how to be ethical and to think ethically and therefore be ethical for Murdoch depends on how we are able to perceive others and the world. Her view is summed up in the title of the talk – “learning to *be* better from learning to *see* better”. An individual can only become more ethical – and even understand what this might mean – if one can *see* ethically.

### ***‘Sight’ not ‘choice’***

Cultivating *sight*, rather than enabling *choice* is key for Murdoch. Ethics is not – as it is for many contemporary liberal philosophers – a matter of making better choices. Ethics is not about rationally gathering the facts, and then making choice upon which one then acts. Seeing the ‘facts’, what is ethically significant, is itself an ethical endeavour or process for Murdoch. It is a matter of ongoing striving and habit which effectively makes ‘choice’ inevitable. For Murdoch choices are not distinct and separate instances, we cannot ‘choose’ to become better in an instant, by a rational decision, or an ‘act of will’. For Murdoch, instances of ‘moral choice’, or instances of genuine ethical dilemma, are illusory; even though they might seem

like crucial points in hindsight when we rationalise and construct narratives and self-narratives.

For Murdoch, choice and acts are secondary at best. Primary moral activity is not the 'choices' one makes (when these are understood as separate moments of moral change), but the 'background' which determines these choices. It is this background moral activity where moral 'work' happens – our habits, modes of thoughts, attitudes and character – determine the apparent choice. This ethical work is something which 'goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices' (Murdoch, 1970, p37). To ignore this complexity and ongoing 'work' of character is to reduce human beings to 'a foot-loose, solitary, substanceless will.' (Murdoch, 1970, p16).

To identify ethics with 'choice', for Murdoch, is to focus in the wrong place and this will not – in her view – help to make us more ethical, as it will obscure the way in which people can learn to be better and ethically improve. To 'be' better we need to focus on the 'background', not just a series of choices and actions, but the connections between them which help us understand why this particular person chose, or acted, in this particular way. As Murdoch states, when we want to know what someone is like we don't just consider discrete actions, but 'something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life...the texture of a man's being or nature of his personal vision' (Murdoch, 1997 [1956], p80-81). In other words we are interested in how people think and feel about the world and other people; we need to know something about 'who they are' and what matters to them, before we can properly and ethically assess their choices. For her, if we wish describe a person as good 'we are led also to reflect on his states of consciousness, his capacity for recollection, for reflection, for *attention*, for the deep intuitive syntheses of moral vision' (Murdoch, 1992, p378). So to

focus on choice is essentially backwards – it is the symptom not the cause. To understand the ethical life and how to ethically improve we need to focus on “moral nature” or “moral being” (Murdoch, 1997 [1956], p81). In this interpretation, choice and action are not significant ‘willed decisions’ but products of something more fundamental, something which is like character. Accordingly, choices depend not on our ‘strength of will but...[on]...the quality of our usual attachments and... the kind of energy and discernment we have available’ (Murdoch, 1970, p92)

To improve the quality of our character for Murdoch we need to improve our moral vision, as for her the moral task is ‘to come to see the world as it really is’ (Murdoch, 1992, p91). This for Murdoch is not simple, but includes creating good habits, and forcing ourselves ‘to have good desires and remove or weaken bad ones’ (Murdoch, 1992, p395). In her words

The world is not given to us “on a plate”, it is given to us as a creative task. It is impossible to banish morality from this picture. We *work*, using or failing to use our honesty, our courage, our truthful imagination, at the interpretation of what is present to us, as we of necessity shape it and “make something of it”. We help it to be. (Murdoch, 1992, p215).

Learning to see well then is the first step in learning to be ethical – as seeing better provides the background to be able to choose and act in better ways. To illustrate what she means Murdoch uses the term ‘moral colour’. She suggests there is no neutral way of *seeing* as all facts are value-laden. For her the world is always perceived morally as ‘in many familiar ways *various* values pervade and *colour* what we take to be the reality of our world; wherein we constantly evaluate our own values and those of others, and judge and determine forms of

consciousness and modes of being'. (Murdoch, 1992, p26). 'Sight' or 'vision' is the paramount metaphor. Morality depends on what one is capable of seeing for 'the selfish self-interestedly casual or callous man *sees* a different world from that which the careful scrupulous benevolent just man sees; and the largely explicable ambiguity of the word "see" here conveys the essence of the concept of the moral' (Murdoch, 1992, p177)). Becoming better, learning to be ethical, then comes down to broadening our vision, to seeing as clearly and disinterestedly as possible; it is about the images we choose and the way we choose to imagine ourselves and the world (for just as perception is not morally neutral, neither is imagination (Murdoch, 1992, p314)). In short, '*how* we see our situation is itself, already, a moral activity' (Murdoch, 1992, p315). Perception is a mode of evaluation: 'I can only choose within the world I can *see*, in the moral sense of "see" which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort' (Murdoch, 1970, p37).

### ***Difficulties of delusion***

Having explained why we need to learn to 'see' better in order to 'be' better in Murdoch's framework I want to spend some time explaining how hard Murdoch thinks this is. Seeing clearly is not a simple task, if it were then the dominant ethical focus on choice would not be so problematic, but for Murdoch, it is hard for human beings to see past their preoccupation with themselves.

Murdoch describes human beings as naturally selfish and egoistic beings who are usually deceived by their own self-consoling delusions. It is this which makes seeing truly so hard, because the tendency is to falsely aggrandise the self and hide from the realities of other people and the world. Murdoch says in this self-protective endeavour, 'our minds are continually active, fabricating and anxious, usually self-preoccupied' (Murdoch, 1970, p84).

As human beings it is our ‘natural impulse to derealise our world and surround ourselves with fantasy’ (Murdoch, 1992, p503). To this end we rationalise situations and create justifying narratives in order to shield our fragile selves from reality and its demands (Murdoch, 1970, p84; p165). The task of the moral life is to break through such self-obsessed fantasy and to try to see what is outside the self and the ego – to see other people, the world and what is ethically valuable. For Murdoch ‘the enemy is the fat relentless ego’ (Murdoch, 1970, p52). As we learn to see more truly and become more ethical we come better at seeing, and ‘we know when we are being satisfied with superficial, illusory, lying pictures which distort and conceal reality’ (Murdoch, 1992, p 462). As we fight our selfish fantasies our ego is reduced and we are able to see more clearly – our vision is broadened and we achieve an ‘increased sense of the reality of, primarily of course other people, but also other things’ (Murdoch, 1992, p52).

The virtuous person then, is one who manages to escape her illusions and to see other people and the world truly. Murdoch dismisses ‘the idea of a really good man living in a private dream world ..[as]...unacceptable...he must know certain things about his surroundings, most obviously the existence of other people’ (Murdoch, 1970, p59). At its simplest ‘morality is loss of egoism’ (Murdoch, 1992, p468) and replacing self interest and obsession with a clear and honest vision of what is real.

### ***Implications for policy and education***

In my final section I’d like to elaborate a little on what this particular understanding of virtue can offer to education and policy more broadly. If Murdoch is right – and we need to teach people to learn to *see* better if they are to learn to *be* better – then a number of practical implications flow from this, and I’d like to draw out three of these a little: First, the

importance of improving character and not decision-making skills or informed choice; second, the importance of learning practical techniques and practices; and third, the danger of too much self-reflection.

First, the view that character is something developed over-time and with practice is something which all virtue ethicists share (and which is an important distinction between virtue ethics and other types of ethics). But what is distinctive about Murdoch's conception is the extreme problems this creates for an ethic which focuses on choice. A significant amount of ethical education (and policy understanding of ethics in general) focuses on helping people develop better 'decision-making practices' or on ensuring that people exercise 'informed choice'. Murdoch's view of choice as, at best, derivative rather than primary, makes this focus problematic. For Murdoch one simply cannot make ethically good choices, without improving one's moral vision – one can't choose well if one can't see well (at least, good choices will be accidental, not consistent, and often not 'options' for those who are not virtuous as they will be 'opaque' to those whose moral vision or sensitivity is not developed sufficiently).

Given this, for Murdoch 'choice' is not a point of moral transformation – which is often assumed in theories which focus on improved decision making. Rather, as we gradually improve our moral vision we can gradually see what previously we could not, and thus we can make better – by which I mean more ethical – choices. These choices are simply not available to those who have not developed their moral sight, character, and vision. Precisely because the world is morally coloured – different for each as we see the world evaluatively – there is no simple, rational and informed choice. Therefore providing 'facts' and 'informing' choice in any simplistic way is not going to help people be ethical in itself. A first lesson then



from Murdoch is to emphasise decision-making capacity and informed choice less and instead focus more on ensuring that people have the ability and capability to be able to see what is ethically salient. This requires that instead of focusing on discrete instances of choice – on moral dilemmas and moments of ‘intervention’ – much longer timescales are required and we need to focus on incremental development over time. In addition it suggests that ‘dramatic’ change and ‘conversion’ is unlikely – and in instances where this apparently occurs it is likely that the ‘seeds’ of this will be evident before and over time, and before the ‘choice’ significant effort and character-building will have occurred. It is this moral effort which makes the dramatic choice possible and not an act of will or a ‘decision’.

Second, if we are to build character, or strengthen moral vision, or whatever terminology one wishes to use we need to focus on how this is to be done. Here Murdoch recommends very practical techniques to teach one to ‘see better’. She speaks about creating habits – so good choices become automatic – as well as the importance of focusing ‘attention’ and using images to help one improve. Just to mention one example, let us consider her understanding of the giving of ‘attention’. ‘Attention’, Murdoch describes as a technique for the ‘purification and reorientation of energy which is naturally selfish’ (Murdoch, 1970, p54). It is simply the giving one’s attention to an object or person fully and completely and to the extent where you ‘forget yourself’. Attention can be focused on anything – objects of art are, for Murdoch, some of the best objects of attention because they are particularly absorbing – so too is nature – as, for instance, in her oft used description of watching a kestrel and finding herself taken away from her selfish preoccupations. Another example is the experience of falling in love when the centre of one’s world shifts dramatically from oneself to another. Likewise she describes ‘any serious learning...[as]...a moral-spiritual activity’ (Murdoch, 1992, p338), as studying directs attention away from the self and serves to ‘stretch the

imagination, enlarge the vision and strengthen the vision' (Murdoch, 1970, p90). This list shows that really practical techniques and practices can teach us in all kinds of ways that other people and things are real and matter and learning in one area helps us improve our ability to see in others. Different people will find different examples resonate with them. For me, perhaps not surprisingly as an academic, I find writing an obvious one – an experience where I do forget myself. But essentially it doesn't matter what the object of attention is, anything where we 'lose ourselves' is in Murdoch's schema good training – it teaches us that other people and things are real and reduces the ego. There are many possible ways that this could be developed, almost anything has potential – from study to sport, from volunteering to dancing – the point is that effort in one area can be instructive for how to give attention in other areas. This connects ethical learning to the rest of life (another of Murdoch's key themes). In Murdoch's words, attention helps us 'change our orientation, to redirect our desire and refresh and purify our energy, to keep on looking in the right direction' (Murdoch, 1992, p25). So practices which teach that effort is rewarded and which direct attention away from the self are likely to be worth exploring.

Third, and finally, while Murdoch has a strong focus on being better and on making oneself better she warns against becoming self-obsessed, of mistaking self-reflection for the task of becoming better. This is where the implications of her particular emphasis on the deluding nature of the ego is important. In contrast to much contemporary rhetoric about the importance of 'self improvement', and of 'being true to oneself', and 'knowing oneself' Murdoch is wary of looking at oneself too much or giving oneself too much attention. This fits with some recent psychological and empirical evidence which suggests that reflection may not in fact lead to better choices (Bortolotti (2011)). Either way Murdoch provides a timely reminder that self-reflection has its own dangers and there are reasons to be wary of

‘looking in’ – as this can lead to a ‘me, me, me focus’ even if the intention is ethical improvement. If we focus too much on the self there is a danger that we will be distracted and deluded as we fall into the traps of the ego. We will think we are more interesting and important than we actually are and so find it harder to see outside the self and to the real: to use Murdoch’s favourite Platonic metaphor, we will mistake the ‘fire’ for the ‘sun’. Rather than dwelling on the self we should focus our ‘attention’ outwards, on things and artefacts, nature and animals and, for Murdoch, most importantly (and with most difficulty) on other people and on what is good. Being better – then requires seeing better – which requires attention away from rather than towards the self.