

Original Paper

Iris Murdoch's "Attention" and the Care of the Elderly

Chen Su¹

¹ School of International Studies, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China

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Abstract

This article argues that in contrast to modern moral philosophy's focus on will and choice, British philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch's moral theory of "attention", defined as a just and loving gaze, focuses on the quality of consciousness and individual moral growth, which can help to promote individual moral perception in caring for the elderly in an aging society, especially to realize an ethical attention to the older people.

Keywords

Iris Murdoch, Attention, Care for the Elderly

1. Introduction

With the large expansion of aging population, aging has become a global challenge in the process of rapid social transformation which involves not only the economic development but also a series of social and ethical questions. Thus, care for the elderly is an ethical practice that aims at the well-being of the old people. Whether it is the mainstream moral theories based on "free will" such as Kantianism and utilitarianism, or the ethics of care with its emphasis on "relational perspective" instead of "moral agency" and with its focus on particular concerns rather than universal principles, these moral theories, to a certain extent, have provided possible ideological axes and policy guidelines for an aging society and have provided behavioral guidelines for ethical choices in specific moral situations. However, caring for the elderly is not only a moral obligation that people should fulfill in society, but more importantly, old age is a necessary stage in an individual's life, and behind the act of caring for the elderly lies the individual's recognition of the meaning of life and the requirement of the individual's moral quality. Therefore, the moral philosophy involving elderly care should not only be based on theories discussing universal or particular moral behaviors, but also needs to pay attention to the growth of individual moral psychology. In this sense, the concept of "Attention" put forward by British philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch has provided the possibility to promote individual moral

perception in caring for the elderly in an aging society, especially to realize an ethical attention to the older people.

Inspired by Plato, Murdoch understands moral growth as the transformation and enhancement of the moral vision from the agent as well as the quality of consciousness, which must be transformed by a just and loving attention to the other in order to gradually reorient the consciousness from selfishness to selflessness under the light and attraction of the good. This shows that what is important and responsible in moral life is not only will power to act, but also the attention to direct the energy of consciousness and to improve the quality of vision. Thus, the focus of Murdoch's moral philosophy is to restore the connection between morality and self-worth, history and community, and to argue for the moral meaning of inner life, where "attention" becomes the basis for moral evaluation and moral choice. This article is to analyze Murdoch's theory of "attention" in detail and demonstrate that "the just and loving gaze" is an indispensable moral quality in the care of the elderly.

2. The Importance of Attention in Moral Philosophy

2.1 Limitations of Independent, Neutral and Rational Moral Agency

"Attention" is the most important concept in Murdoch's moral philosophy. Murdoch once confessed that "attention" was a concept she borrowed directly from the French philosopher Simone Weil (1909-1943):

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 active moral agent. (SG, p. 33)

In this way, Murdoch succinctly defined the "attention" as: "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality" (SG, p. 33). Under the influence of Weil, Murdoch was unsatisfied with the moral philosophy prevalent during her time. Her criticism upon modern moral philosophy can be summarized into the following three points:

First, in the twentieth century, under the influence of analytical philosophy, some ethicists favored the clarification of ethical terms and concepts instead of the exploration and resolution of substantive issues, which reduced the originally rich and concrete study of life meanings to abstract and logical analysis. Second, Murdoch finds that modern moral philosophy since Kant presupposes that the moral agent is a self-regulated rational being. In order to obtain the greatest freedom from external constraints, the agent is removed from the concrete social, historical, interpersonal, and value contexts. The moral agent, in this way, is pictured as an "empty choosing will" (SG, p. 34) or "an isolated principle of will" (SG, p. 47)—"the agent, thin as a needle, appears in the quick flash of the choosing will" (SG, p. 52). Lastly, due to its limiting the role of moral agency to the endpoint of choosing will, the focus of moral discussion is consequently restricted to the choice and action of will, neglecting the context of action and the inner life course of the agent. Therefore, this philosophy not only neglects the role of perception, emotion, and imagination in the moral realm, but also leads to inadequate explanations of

moral change, failing to provide adequate concepts and rhetoric for the rich and diverse moral experiences of human beings, and failing to provide a set of effective technical guidelines for moral formation.

The shortcomings of modern moral philosophy criticized by Murdoch also indicates the ethical challenges for the aging society, as the neutral and rational moral agent is deprived of the relations with others and is unaware of the responsibilities he/she should shoulder. Murdoch attempts to replace the hollow, pulseless, self-regulating rational will with a “consciousness” that contains an abundance of inner life and value connections, to reconstruct the inner meanings of the moral self, and to establish an organic continuity between the inner mental activities and outer actions of the moral agent in all life moments. In a word, to cultivate goodness throughout individual life experience and to construct ethical relations between self and others, Murdoch develops moral philosophy of “attention” which can inspire the care of the elderly in contemporary society.

2.2 Moral Attention, not the Will, as the Foundation of Moral Agency

In contrast to modern moral philosophy’s focus on will, Murdoch quoted from Simone Weil as advocating: “that morality was a matter of attention, not of will. We need a new vocabulary of attention” (*EM*, p. 293). First, it is important to note that Murdoch’s understanding of the concept of will is primarily limited to willpower or volitional effort, and when she compares will with attention, she usually links the former directly to the practice of action, while the latter is related to the observational activity of the agent:

It may be better, as I suggested earlier, to restrict the term will, as ‘willing’ or ‘exercise of will’, to cases where there is an immediate straining, for instance occasioned by a perceived duty or principle, against a large part of preformed consciousness. What moves us—our motives, our desires, our reasoning—emerges from a constantly changing complex; moral change is the change of that complex, for better or worse. (*MM*, p. 300)

Murdoch argues that morality is not only about the specific practice of behavior, but also about the agent’s vision of himself/herself and the world. We should see moral life as a continuous cognitive process, in which moral choices and actions are made before and after, and the events between them are the sites of moral development. As she once explained that:

But if we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over. ...The moral life, on this view, is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial. (*SG*, pp. 35-36)

Therefore, Murdoch has quoted from Weil and stated that, “Action is the pointer of the balance. One must not touch the pointer, but the weights.” (*EM*, p. 158) This comparison of action to the pointer and inner life (moral consciousness) to the weights not only illustrates the relationship between action and

inner life, but also points out that in order to change action, one must begin with the inner life. “The pointer of the balance” represents the result of a tug of war, symbolizing the final choice of action, but it is the weights that determines the direction of the pointer, and it symbolizes the quality of the inner life of the moral agent. Just like the weights itself, the activities of inner life are invisible, but it has a solid force that determines one’s behaviour.

Murdoch also argues that although “voluntaristic philosophers”, especially Kant, also tried to find something pure outside the selfish empirical psyche as the basis for moral achievement (SG, p. 81), they went in the wrong direction and returned to human beings themselves for help. This is a futile search for help. According to Murdoch’s view of human consciousness, it is an ambiguous, obscure, and inherently self-centred energy system to which the will is subordinate and which cannot be redeemed on its own:

Where strong emotions of sexual love, or of hatred, resentment, or jealousy are concerned, ‘pure will’ can usually achieve little. It is small use telling oneself ‘Stop being in love, stop feeling resentment, be just.’ What is needed is a reorientation which will provide an energy of a different kind, from a different source. Notice the metaphors of orientation and of looking. The neo-Kantian existentialist ‘will’ is a principle of pure movement. But how ill this describes what it is like for us to alter. Deliberately falling out of love is not a jump of the will, it is the acquiring of new objects of attention and thus of new energies as a result of refocusing. The metaphor of orientation may indeed also cover moments when recognizable ‘efforts of will’ are made, but explicit efforts of will are only a part of the whole situation. (SG, p. 54)

It is clear from this passage that Murdoch believes that the only way to change an emotional dilemma is to appeal to a new source of energy and redirect attention, and that attention is this redirection of attention from the self to other people or things. Unlike the solitary struggle of the will, “attention” is directed or focused on the transcendent good, in which the moral agent concerned “an attempt to look right away from self towards a distant transcendent perfection, a source of uncontaminated energy, a source of new and quite undreamt-of virtue” (SG, p. 99). By focusing on the good, the consciousness is drawn to transcend the ignorance of self-realization, and its ability to see reality is raised, so that it can have a clearer understanding of reality.

2.3 Basic Requirements of Murdoch’s Attention

In her book review of *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*—“Knowing the Void” (1956), Murdoch also points out:

Spiritual progress is won through meditation: a view which is a contrast (and some may think a welcome corrective) to contemporary English ethics with its exclusive emphasis on act and choice, and its neglect of the ‘inner life’. Here, oddly enough, English philosophy and popular existentialism are on the same side. ...But Simone Weil emphasises ‘waiting’ and ‘attention’. (EM, p. 159)

How different is Murdoch's concept of attention from other moral theories on perception? M. G. Holland attempts to explain the three requirements of moral attention in her analysis of Murdoch's philosophy—accurate, just, and loving—as to how attention can be used to gain a clearer understanding of other individuals in concrete practice.

First, “accurate” means “trying to see the subject as it is”. This implies that the viewer must abandon preconceptions, open his or her mind, and accept the subject as he or she is. Second, “just” means “taking into account all relevant contexts and factors that contribute to a holistic understanding” and giving a just assessment of the object. Third, “loving” includes the elements of patience and generosity. Loving attention means “avoiding too much haste and allowing time for the subject to express himself or herself with ease”, without making snap judgments. And “recognizing that the individual's vision is always limited, retaining the possibility of relevant factors beyond one's ability to grasp. In other words, it is to acknowledge my own limitations and the possible factors beyond my control. It is also the same as asking for an “open” and “open-minded” attitude, a generosity that allows for things beyond one's grasp and for different interpretations of the same moral situation. (Holland, p. 309)

In summary, Murdoch's concept of attention is a constant effort to remove self-conceptions, to be open-minded, attentive, impartial, and patient in seeing and accepting the unique qualities of each individual's existence. Here we can perhaps draw a simple contrast between Murdoch's “attention” and Sartre's “the petrifying gaze of the Medusa”. Sartre sees the presence of others as a threat and a restriction on my existence, and this threat and restriction is particularly manifested in the gaze of others on me, as if they are watching my every move and restricting my freedom, but for Murdoch, the ability to recognize the presence of the other, to see the specific and particular real needs of others, and to respond appropriately to them through the ability to pay moral attention to them, is the true freedom.

3. Love as the Key to Attention

3.1 Attention Is the Loving Gaze

In her book “The Sovereignty of Good”, Murdoch not only requires that attention be a kind of just and loving viewing and gazing, but also the training of detached, unsentimental, unselfish, objective, etc. (SG, p. 64). She argues that modern moral philosophy has neglected the role of love in moral activities to the extent that it no longer speaks of love (SG, p. 2; p. 48; p. 99). Instead, she attempts to propose a “working philosophical psychology” that links the language of modern psychology and virtue with a moral philosophy centered on the concept of love (SG, p. 45).

Murdoch's understanding of love is closely related to moral attention. According to her, human consciousness is essentially a system of self-centered energy; in order to evade the painful damage while facing the harsh truth, the ego develops psychological mechanisms that seek solace and a way out by constructing various false illusions. These illusions become the greatest enemies of morality by blinding us to the real world and preventing us from understanding the real existence and needs of others. In order to curb the selfish tendencies of the ego, to uncover the barriers of ignorance, to get to

know others and the world as they really are, and to understand the proper relationships between people, we need some moral training. In this sense, Murdoch puts forward moral attention, which refers to shifting attention from self-centeredness to other people, to being open and attentive to the existence, desires, and needs of others. Therefore, moral attention indicates a positive energy of love that is defined by Murdoch as a positive regard and response to the existence of other concrete individuals, and “just and attentive looking is seen as an exercise of love” (Bove, p. 15).

Murdoch’s belief that love can reorientate one’s attention is largely inspired by Plato:

Falling in love is for many people their most intense experience, bringing with it a quasi-religious certainty, and most disturbing because it shifts the centre of the world from oneself to another place. A love relationship can occasion extreme selfishness and possessive violence, the attempt to dominate that other place so that it be no longer separate; or it can prompt a process of unselfing wherein the lover learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself. (*MM*, pp. 16-17)

In *Phaedrus*, Plato explains love as a kind of madness ($\mu\acute{\alpha}\nu\iota\alpha$), arguing that love produces a divine power in the mind that enables it to turn away from the unreal world of experience and to recall the real knowledge it has glimpsed in the rational world in the past. Interestingly, Murdoch again uses elements of Weil’s thought to transform love into an unselfing force, arguing that love has the power to bring us to a divine selflessness and that love can only be true when I have removed my self-centeredness, when I no longer think of myself as the center of the world, and when I no longer see others through my own preconceptions.

Because love directs attention from the self-centered to the other, it is willing to look at the other truly, to perceive the other’s existence, and to bring about a positive regard and respect for the other. In this sense, love is the pursuit of personal knowledge in the form of directing attention. In other words, love is an energy that also brings results, i.e., knowledge of the individual. At first glance, defining “love” in terms of “knowledge” may seem incomprehensible, but it is not so difficult to understand when placed in Murdoch’s philosophy. For her, moral knowledge is not an objective scientific understanding of a single factual world, but a concrete grasp of each living and special individual in a realistic situation of existence, an endless struggle for excellence. “Love” is precisely the knowledge of the individual in progress.

As love is decisive in individual’s understanding of self and reality, Murdoch further demonstrates how love fulfills the pursuit of personal knowledge. First, love is the recognition of the fact of existence of other individuals. Murdoch once described Sartre’s and linguistic-analysts’ portrayal of human relationships as neurosis and conventions which are the two enemies of love or the “failure of love” (Gordon, pp. 20-21). The reason for this is that the former sees the existence of others as a negation and threat to one’s freedom and therefore refuses to relate to them, refusing to know them as they really are and preferring to indulge in their own fantasy world. The latter allows the individual to sink into a large social or linguistic structure, to be controlled by social or linguistic forces, and to lose its independent

existence. (EM, p. 216, p. 268) On the contrary, Murdoch tries to emphasize the power of love so that we can recognize and face the fact of existence of others through love—“love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness” (EM, p. 216). In this way, on the one hand, the connection between the self and others can be restored, and on the other hand, it is emphasized that the individual is the central object of morality, so that the individual will not be dissolved into the whole. Secondly, Murdoch argues that the agent’s perception of a moral situation is a complex activity, not only passively receiving sensations and material, but also participating in the active imagination, which is a special kind of moral perception. Therefore a “moral imagination and moral effort” (SG, p. 36) is necessary to obtain a clear vision. In this regard, Murdoch connects love with imagination, arguing that the imagination that enables us to know the real is love: “love, an exercise of the imagination” (EM, p. 216); “love is the purification of the imagination” (EM, pp. 219-220). This echoes and explains that love is a faculty of seeing.

3.2 *Imagination in Loving Attention*

In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morality*, Murdoch devotes a chapter to the imagination and distinguishes between two active faculties operating in moral perception: fantasy and imagination. The former is understood by her definition as the role of blurring perception with false images of self-satisfaction, while the latter is the ability to see beyond illusion to the other as it is - fantasy is bad (“bad by definition”, MM, p. 322), and is “bad use of imagination” (EM, p. 202). In short, it is the imagination, not the role of fantasy, that can help us gain real knowledge.

While imagination seems to be commonly referred to as an ability that helps us to escape reality and to escape into the world of dreams, Murdoch uses it in such a way that “we use our imagination not to escape the world but to join it” (SG, p. 88). Murdoch argues that imagination is an active, constructive activity (EM, p. 199). Even though we are always raised in a particular ethnic, religious, cultural, and socio-economic environment, with different histories and traditions and we develop unique personalities and expressions of life with limited horizons, with the help of imagination (MM, p. 322), we are able to change our viewpoints, transcend the limits of our own horizons, and envision multiple possibilities. In this sense, imagination is the ability to expand, to put oneself in the shoes of others, to imagine their situations and needs, and to extrapolate empathy from the heart to the mind.

In short, for Murdoch, to love is to compassionately expand our imagination to truly appreciate the situations and needs of others. Love is a quality of moral perception that elevates our ability to face our personal realities and gain personal knowledge. It is also the virtue of an ethical agent:

Freedom is exercised in the confrontation by each other, in the context of an infinitely extensible work of imaginative understanding, of two irreducibly dissimilar individuals. Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness. (EM, p. 216)

In summary, to love an object is to acknowledge the independent existence of the object itself, that is, to affirm that the other self is also a continuum rich in inner life, with history, community, and values. Furthermore, love is the willingness to abandon self-centered stereotypes and self-inflated pride, to

enter into the life situation and life experience of each unique individual with an open mind and imagination, to recognize its unique characteristics of life and existence, to respect and appreciate its unique way of being, and to respond responsibly and appropriately according to its individual needs. In this sense, love is more than a feeling or an emotional state—as the agent continues to practice love and to see the self and the world in love, over time he or she will develop the habit and inclination to see and act correctly and become a virtuous person.

4. Attention in Aging Society

It is common for young or middle-aged people today to feel exactly this sense of superiority toward the elderly: old people are slow-moving, not modern, even throwbacks to an earlier era. Moreover, in the mass culture, people tend to over-generalize and treat older people, ageing, and old age in a stereotypical manner. This stereotypical construction of older people, ageing, and old age is called “ageism.” Some scholars have recognized that “ageism is ubiquitous: It is in our perception of older people and in our actions towards older people” (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, p. 1).

It is under this circumstance that Murdoch’s idea of “Attention” can help to promote the care of the elderly on both individual and social levels. First, old age, like death, is an indictment of that fantasy of agitation that the young and middle-aged take to be the meaning of life. Old age appears only as a limbo state, an absence of meaning in life. This view of old age is prejudiced by the New Liberal discourse that values unobstructed development of economy and individual autonomy. Murdoch’s analysis of just and loving attention is the way to discover the reality of old age by effacing self-centered anxiety. In this way, self is able to aware the ontological vulnerability of human beings and provide substantial care for the older people. Secondly, old age is not simply one more stage but the final stage, the stage that sums up all that went before (Moody, p. 58). As it is shown by Levy that the presence of ageism not only in the way one group treats another but also as the “enemy within” (2001). According to Levy, ageism is often directed at one’s self and can be implicit. It occurs with very little awareness or intention and literally impacts the social interactions and life of each and every one of us. In this sense, the care of the elderly is also a care for individual life meanings. Murdoch’s moral philosophy of attention is not only a “just and loving gaze” at the others, but also enhancement and enrichment of inner life. Although *eudaimonia* is a classical concept originated from Aristotle, the difficulty with the Aristotelian account of virtue and *eudaimonia* is that it appears to make human fulfillment excessively dependent on the force of external circumstance, which has resulted in the “fragility of goodness” as Nussbaum demonstrates in her distinguished monograph *The Fragility of Goodness*. In contrast, with her focus on moral agent’s inner life, Murdoch attempts grasp and explain the delicate and slow moral changes contained in the various levels and interfaces of human life in order to cultivate a moral “consciousness” that contains an abundance of inner life and value connections. From elevating individual moral perception, Murdoch’s advocacy of “attention” is to achieve a more friendly and benevolent society, especially for the older people.

5. Conclusion

The individual is not an isolated island, and a moral agent is the one with rich inner lives and is properly connected to others as well as a set of transcendent values, whose morality is broadly expressed in his/her awareness of and response to self, others, the world and values. The moral life does not occur only fragmentarily in the action of the will at the moment of choice, but permeates the whole being of the actor, including all the inner psychological states of his consciousness, such as the individual's beliefs, emotions, perceptions, imagination, and attitudes or values of life. Thus, it is important in moral life to cultivate moral attention for the others through and in love, so that we can constantly strive to be open-minded, free of self-belief, genuinely engaged, and attentive, to see and accept the unique qualities of the other as they exist, and to respond responsibly and appropriately. Hence, Murdoch's idea of attention can really be a valuable inspiration for the care of the elderly.

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Note

Abbreviations in this article: SG: *The Sovereignty of Good*, EM: *Existentialists and Mystics*, MM: *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.