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## **Lessons of Murdochian attention**

### Abstract

The idea of attention was brought back into mainstream philosophical thinking about ethics by Iris Murdoch, drawing on Simone Weil. While Murdoch's use of the idea has been reflected on by a number of recent commentators, I think its deepest lessons have largely been missed. Beginning from a recurrent and revealing misreading of Murdoch on attention, a misreading often articulated through reflection on Murdoch's example of M and D, I want to bring out some of those lessons. It is well-known that Murdoch links attention with just and loving vision. I describe a common, mistaken account of what she means by just and loving vision; and I then turn to other connotations of attention invoked by Murdoch. These other connotations are mentioned in despatches by some commentators, but not dwelt upon. While Murdoch herself does not explore them extensively either, I argue that they are important for teasing out what matters most in Murdoch's invocation of attention. As that way of putting suggests, my interest in Murdochian exegesis is eventually superseded by my attempts to elicit what I think to be some of the most fruitful implications of her reflections on attention.

## Lessons of Murdochian attention

“Simone Weil said that morality was a matter of attention, not of will. We need a new vocabulary of attention.” Iris Murdoch, “Against Dryness”. (Murdoch 1997, 293)

The idea of attention was brought back into mainstream philosophical thinking about ethics by Iris Murdoch. Murdoch was herself drawing on Simone Weil.<sup>i</sup> In the flood of recent discussion of Murdoch, her idea of attention has been reflected on by a number of commentators. Even so, I think the deepest lessons of Murdoch’s invocation of attention have largely been missed.<sup>ii</sup> I believe these lessons are profoundly important for moral philosophy. Beginning from a recurrent and revealing misreading of Murdoch on attention, I want to try to bring out at least some main aspects of those lessons.<sup>iii</sup>

Murdoch’s highlighting of attention is linked to her reviving of the image of *vision* for moral philosophy, against what she took to be the predominating image of *choice* in moral philosophy. By making morals most fundamentally a matter of choosing and acting, against a background of unproblematically given facts, the image or model of choice deflected appreciation, Murdoch thought, of the moral importance and difficulty of *seeing* clearly, truly, justly.<sup>iv</sup> It is against this background that Murdoch invokes the concept of attention as important for moral philosophy.

Many of those who I think misread Murdoch on attention would probably agree with the sketch I’ve just given. But in how they go on from this familiar starting point even commentators well-disposed to Murdoch often tend, in my view, to mistake her, in ways that slide over the radical implications of her concern with attention. It is true that their mistaken reading is not discouraged by some ways Murdoch herself at times spoke about attention. But I think it is plausible to suggest that on those occasions, given how she elsewhere speaks about attention, Murdoch herself misses the deepest thrust of her own thinking.

Murdoch's example of M and D highlights the importance of attention; and the example has attracted a great deal of commentary:

A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M 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....<sup>v</sup> Thus much for M's first thoughts about D. Time passes, and it could be that M settles down with a hardened sense of grievance and a fixed picture of D, imprisoned (if I may use a question-begging word) by the cliché: my poor son has married a silly vulgar girl. However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: '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.' Here I assume that M observes D until gradually her vision of D alters.... 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. (Murdoch: 1997, 312-313)

The word 'attention' is here italicized by Murdoch; and shortly after she reiterates its importance:

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. (327).

Two pages later, Murdoch relates her use of 'attention' to her use of the word 'looking':

When M is just and loving she sees D as she really is.... I would like on the whole to use the word 'attention' as a good word and use some more general term like 'looking' as the neutral word. Of course psychic energy flows, and more readily flows, into building up convincingly coherent but false pictures of the world, complete with systematic vocabulary (M seeing D as pert-common-juvenile, etc.) Attention is the effort to counteract such states of illusion. (329)

So Murdoch ties attention closely to ‘just and loving’ seeing. She also says that ‘when M is just and loving [sees justly and lovingly] she sees D as she really is’ (329).<sup>vi</sup> One way of describing my task in this essay is as getting clear about the connections, in Murdoch’s thinking, between the three elements just mentioned: attention (or attending); seeing justly and lovingly; and seeing D as she really is. Despite the efforts of Murdoch’s many commentators, this task needs revisiting if we are to appreciate the radical import of Murdoch’s thinking. I begin by reflecting on one common enough misreading of Murdochian attention.

About the M and D episode Julia Driver writes:

...M is someone who is ‘capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her. And she does just that with D. By careful attention to detail, (M) comes to change her view of D... (This) gives us an example of moral reflection, and how it works. Attention to detail gets us further at the truth. But we have to approach such cases with mental descriptions that are general, and then search for more detail.’ (Driver 2012, 302)<sup>vii</sup>

Driver seems to take it that, by contrast with simply ‘looking’, Murdochian attention is ‘attention to detail’. A link to ‘seeing something as it really is’ is then forged by supposing that the reality of what is attended to is more fully revealed by this attention to its details: ‘Attention to detail gets us further at the truth’. Driver’s reading thus absorbs Murdochian attention into seeing accurately: attention is attention *to detail* and attention to detail gives us more accurate perception of what is seen.

An immediate problem with this reading is that it simply overlooks Murdoch’s explicit insistence that attending *cannot* be assimilated to seeing accurately: ‘What M is *ex hypothesi* attempting to do is not just to see D accurately but to see her justly or lovingly’ (1997, 317). To interpret M’s giving just attention to D as a matter of M’s newly giving ‘careful attention to detail’ is surely unwarranted and misleading. Driver’s is not a minor misreading. I want to spell out its import.

There is indeed *a* straightforward sense in which attention to detail does indeed ‘get us further at the truth’, provided it yields actual features or properties<sup>viii</sup> of the situation or object or person on which it is directed. In that sense, *any* registered actual detail of a situation or object or person gets the one who registers it ‘further at the truth’ – about the situation or object or person.<sup>ix</sup> But that does nothing to validate Driver’s reading of Murdoch.

Driver says the example of M and D ‘gives us an example of moral reflection and how it works’. She also says the example presents moral reflection as here working *by* an ‘attention to detail’ which ‘gets us further at the truth’. This has, I suggest, little plausibility either as a general account – even as an element of a general account – of ‘moral reflection and how it works’, or as a reading of how Murdoch invites us to see it as working in this particular case. Let me speak to these blunt claims in turn.

Moral reflection obviously sometimes *can* involve an ‘attention’ that aims to disclose actual details – whether coarse- or fine-grained – about a situation or object or person. But a focus on such details is not – not ever – *per se* ‘an example of moral reflection’. Whether it does exemplify such reflection will depend – to put it simply – on the point and the spirit of the focus. (More on that in a moment.) Sometimes such focused attention to details is simply irrelevant to moral reflection (and to just and loving attention as expressing such reflection); and sometimes it positively obstructs genuine moral reflection. It certainly constitutes no *model* of ‘moral reflection and how it works’, as Driver implies it does.

One aim of moral reflection is indeed naturally enough expressible as ‘taking us further’ (Driver’s words) to the truth of what we reflect on. But lest that formulation be thought suspiciously tilted towards ‘metaphysical’ talk of moral truth, we might instead re-describe this aim of moral reflection as helping us better appreciate the moral dimensions of a situation. *That* aim, I am suggesting, is not always best realized through greater attention to detail, and is sometimes obstructed by such attention.

Some people, for example, have an acute eye for others' weaknesses, enabling them to home in on things about another that most people miss. Sometimes a guiding purpose of their 'attention' is (say) to turn the screws of humiliation. Indeed, perhaps an attraction to exploiting and humiliating others is sometimes what *gives* a person his acute perception of others' weaknesses. Lawrence Blum suggests this link: 'Some persons are quite perceptive about other people's vulnerabilities that can be exploited for personal gain or maliciousness' (Blum 2012, 311). Again, there is *a* straightforward sense in which someone's acute sensitivity towards such details gets him 'further at the truth' about the other, provided this person does indeed have this or that hard-to-detect weakness. But nothing could be further than *this* 'attention to detail' from the 'moral seeing' Murdoch has in mind – a 'just and loving gaze' directed on another – or from the working of 'moral reflection'. Here attention to detail is *at odds with* moral reflection; it stands in opposition to any moral understanding realized through 'just and loving attention' to another. This does not mean that just and loving attention requires turning a blind eye to people's weaknesses and seeing only their good points. But there is a big difference between someone who has a sense of some of our blemishes, but accepts them as part of the person they love (and perhaps sometimes even finds it necessary for our own good to draw one of them to our attention), and someone who has a sharp nose for sniffing out weaknesses with an aim to exploit them.

But even when not linked to a disposition to exploit or humiliate, perception of detail can be at odds with 'just and loving attention'. Responding in a press conference to the setting up of a Royal Commission into child sexual abuse in Australian institutions, Cardinal George Pell insisted on specifying, and drawing attention to, the precise percentage of known sexual abuse of children that was perpetrated by Catholic priests. He wanted to deflect a degree of blame directed at the Church that he thought to be out of proportion with that percentage. The Cardinal's focus on such details suggested a preoccupation with protecting the Church that deflected him from candid and just responsiveness to the victims of the abuse. Many of the victims themselves experienced Archbishop Pell's attention to that detail as expressive of disregard or disrespect for them, and so as a *further* hurt to them, and I think it is understandable they did so. In *this*

attention to detail Cardinal Pell seemed distracted from rather than engaged with the most important moral dimensions of the events in question.<sup>x</sup> I do not at all suggest there was any *intended* disrespect for the victims – let alone a wish to exploit or humiliate – the victims. But disrespect is often not intended. There are various ways an orientation to details can manifest a ‘looking’ that is less than ‘just and loving’, without being linked to any such intention or wish.

So much, then, for ‘attention to detail’ as anchoring a perfectly general characterization of ‘moral reflection and how it works’. Driver’s terms fare no better in application to Murdoch’s specific example of M and D. There are two observations to make here. Driver says that ‘By careful attention to detail, (M) comes to change her view of D...’; and that ‘Attention to detail gets us further at the truth... we have to approach such cases with mental descriptions that are general, and then search for more detail.’ The suggestion seems to be that M comes to register *more* features of the situation when she ‘looks again’ than when she looked earlier. But this is not so. M does not register a *greater number* of details about D than previously. There is just a re-description of what was seen: D is ‘not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on’ (Murdoch 1997, 313). And not only is there no increase in the number of details actually registered, but M does not even *search for* more detail. The difference lies not in increased resolution of her attention to detail but in the *quality* or *character* of her orientation to D. Driver simply misrepresents what actually goes on in the example as Murdoch gives it to us; and her terms are unconnected with what Murdoch means by loving and just attention.<sup>xi</sup>

Driver’s misreading is shared by others. In a trenchant critique of David Velleman’s account of love, Millgram objects to Velleman’s marrying of Murdoch’s views with Kant’s. The Murdochian element in Velleman’s account, says Millgram, is that love is explained as ‘an arresting awareness of value in a person that makes one really see him or her’. The Kantian element is that you are ‘supposed to love that person as a rational being,



or, more precisely, an “idealized, rational will” ’ (Millgram 2004, 511). But, says Millgram, if Kant’s ‘intelligible rational self is a kind of ideal’, as Velleman takes it to be, it is not what you see, most of the time, when you look attentively at a person. 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. Ideals are fine for many purposes, but when you take yourself to be seeing the ideal when you look at what is in front of you, you are engaged in fantasy, and this is what Velleman’s way of gluing the Murdoch and the Kant together amounts to. (512)

Noting that Velleman calls ‘your rational self your “true self”’, Millgram comments: This use of ‘true’ might as well be a negation operator, and when Velleman tells us that our rational selves are our true selves, he is (inadvertently) acknowledging that they’re not actually our selves at all. (512)

So far as we regard people as rational wills, Millgram says, we are not obeying Murdoch’s injunction to “really look” at them. Conversely, ‘if you are going to treat people lovingly by really attending to them... don’t pretend that what you see are Kantian rational wills’ (513).

I think Velleman does distort things in saying that love of another for ‘him or herself alone’ is ultimately always directed to the other’s rational personhood. But Millgram’s way of putting things embodies its own distortion, pointing as it does in much the same direction as Driver’s reading of Murdoch. Velleman’s distortion is not corrected by replacing Kantian rational personhood with a Millgrammic list of the sorts of things a person sees when looking attentively at another. Here is Millgram invoking Murdoch:

As you might expect, Murdoch took it that seeing what’s really in front of you will lead to ever greater conceptual idiosyncrasies, because your concepts have to be

tailored to the particularities and foibles of the different people you are trying to perceive carefully. (512)

This seems meant to tease out the recognition that ‘really looking’ at another reveals not a Kantian rational essence but an idiosyncratic, quirky, ‘flaky’, unideal particular. But while Murdoch does emphasize the idiosyncratic, unideal character of human beings, still Millgram’s words are seriously misleading as an attempt to spell out her idea that (as she elsewhere puts it) ‘love... is the discovery of [the] reality’ of such creatures (Murdoch 1997, 215). Loving vision is not *essentially* a move towards ‘ever greater conceptual idiosyncrasy’ in the tailoring of one’s concepts to ‘the particularities and foibles’ – for example ‘the stubbornness, emotional flab and overall flakiness’ – of those you are ‘trying to perceive carefully.’ (Indeed a move described in those terms might reflect a cold, even a merciless or cruel, attitude towards the objects of its focus – back to this shortly.) Loving vision *may sometimes* find partial expression in a Millgramian ‘tailoring’ of one’s concepts – when, precisely, the tailoring expresses loving attention, though it would then jar to describe that as ‘carefully trying to perceive another’s foibles’. But such particularizing conceptual refinement is patently inadequate as a *model* of loving vision. If your way of looking is jealous or snobbish or sexist or racist then your conceptual refinement will simply give you higher-resolution sexist or racist or snobbish ‘seeing’. There is no reason at all to suppose that upping the degree of your conceptual refinement (or intensity of focus, or scrutiny) will itself lead you to ‘see truly’. In a way close to Driver’s, Millgram’s model of attention as ‘seeing truly’ is patently inadequate, as it is also at odds with the example of M and D, which involves *no* such intensifying of scrutiny (Millgram) any more than it involves an increase in details registered (Driver). More positively, as I noted a moment ago, such intensifying scrutiny or search for details is in fact readily capable of manifesting the *reverse* of ‘just and loving’ attention – a cold, even merciless or cruel, ‘looking’, for example.

To help bring that last point out, shift the perspective. Imagine a very accurate scrutinizer of *you* – one acutely able to identify all your ‘particularities and foibles’. Would the ‘gaze’ that generates the descriptions this person gives of you necessarily (or even probably!) be experienced by you as ‘loving’? Surely it might well be experienced, and rightly, as

constituting a merciless objectivity, remote from just and loving attention – even if the scrutinizer showed no particular interest in exploiting his accurate perceptions. Just and loving attention of course does not have to avert its eyes from anything unpleasant in another. The question is rather how any such things get taken up into loving attention to him or her. There are myriad ways that might happen, but simply stopping at carefully registering the unpleasant details is not one of them.

Driver and Millgram are a long way, in much the same direction, from plausibly explicating Murdochian attention as just and loving vision; and what they say also distorts what happens in Murdoch's example of M and D. They share the view that Murdochian seeing lovingly and justly comes to (roughly) 'seeing in whatever way yields accurate perception of empirically determinable details'. (Other similar formulations would include: 'seeking and getting more accurate information about...', 'getting the facts right about...', 'acquiring knowledge about...' the object of attention.) I've suggested some reasons for thinking this a serious misunderstanding of Murdochian attention. Before turning to how else we might think of it, let me link this mistaken view with an apparently very different reading of Murdoch.

Bridget Clarke says this about Murdochian attention: 'To attend to something is to approach it with a just and loving eye, and therewith to perceive it in its unbounded particularity and complexity and so as it truly is' (Broackes 2012, 236). Here is a real attempt to get away from thinking of 'moral vision' of another in terms of attention to specific details or features, and to get (so to speak) 'the whole person' in as the object of attention that is loving and just. Unfortunately the attempt fails, in a way at once different from and continuous with the failure of Driver and Millgram. Consider M's initial seeing of D when M is under the sway of jealousy and snobbishness. It is naturally describable as a distorted or obstructed seeing of D, M's vision being obscured by her jealousy and snobbishness – and that is roughly how M herself regards it, when she looks again. But why should M's coming to see D as 'not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous' etc be represented as her coming to perceive D 'in her unbounded particularity and complexity'? In fact I do not know what it would be to see another like

that, nor what it would be to think that one was being *seen by* someone in that way.<sup>xii</sup> Clarke also speaks of seeking ‘a perfect perception’ of someone as another ‘aim’ of attention. I can attach no sense to this, either, as a way of seeing or of being seen. Of course Murdoch herself speaks of the ‘idea of perfection’ in connection with the ‘task’ of attention – hence the title of her essay! But she means *neither* that there is an achievable aim of reaching a perfect perception of another (apparently Clarke’s reading) *nor* that the reason there is no such aim is just that there will always be more details to be perceived. Admittedly, Murdoch perhaps does sail rather close to the wind here, for example when she says: ‘M’s activity is essentially something progressive, something infinitely perfectible...M is engaged in an endless task’ (Murdoch 1997, 318). Fine; but *mere* recognition of the task being ‘progressive’ – of there being more to know – does not dislodge the Driver-Millgram picture. If attention to detail does not constitute seeing better, more morally truly, as we have already seen, it does not do so even if we add to it a recognition that there will always be more, as yet unknown, details to register. (Considered on their own, the sentences of Murdoch’s just quoted do not fully deflect the risk of being read that way.)

In trying to get ‘the whole person’ back in as the object of loving and just attention, Clarke is groping for a formulation that will reflect a change in *M’s whole orientation* to D, a change that means she is really *attending to D*, here and now. But by just indefinitely extending – in effect to infinity – the attention to detail emphasized by Driver and Millgram, Clarke’s formulation turns out to be an extreme variant, a limit version, of Driver’s and Millgram’s view rather than a genuine alternative to it.

The key element of the Driver and Millgram account of just and loving attention also turns out to be at the heart of Lawrence Blum’s on-the-face-of-it different reading of Murdoch. Blum says:

Attention thus involves not only a grasp of a moral reality but a grasp that is the product of a deliberate putting forth of a certain kind of attentiveness or focus. Not all conscious and deliberate attempts to grasp a reality outside the self actually

succeed in doing so; not all focusing of one's consciousness in a certain direction manage to grasp the reality that lies in that direction. (Blum 2012, 310)

Blum's repeatedly uses terms that represent attention as a matter of *appropriation*, or at least attempted appropriation, of its object. Attention aims to 'grasp' – Blum uses the word four times – what is attended to; and the grasp aimed at is itself 'the product of a deliberate putting forth of a certain kind of attentiveness or focus'. This emphasis on attention as a 'conscious and deliberate' activity aiming to get something securely within its grasp is akin to Driver's talk of 'careful attention' to detail, 'approaching such cases [e.g. M's approaching D] with mental descriptions that are general, and then search(ing) for more detail'. It is also akin to Millgram's reference to setting oneself to identify the 'particularities and foibles' of one you are trying to 'perceive carefully'. In Blum, as in Driver and Millgram (and also in Clarke, though in a rather different way), the account of 'seeing justly and lovingly' mistakes the kind of stance or orientation involved in Murdochian attention. It is taken to be a matter of accurate determination of an object, yielding a grasp of enough 'genuine truths' (Blum) about an object to constitute a true picture of it (or perhaps a matter of setting oneself to make such a determination<sup>xiii</sup>).

So, Blum's examples are of people mistaking important features of the empirical-psychological truth about another: Jane does not see that Kendra's behavior suggests 'she is feeling humiliated and psychically battered' (308); Jane misses 'Juan's shaky confidence underneath his superficial bravado', falsely seeing him as 'a confident and commanding individual' (309); Joe's insecurity leads him to misperceive his colleagues' actual motivations when he sees them 'as rivals in a contest for honor and recognition, rather than co-workers in a collective enterprise' (312). In these ways Jane's and Joe's 'subjective perception' (Blum's phrase) falls short of the threshold required for '*accurate* or *just* perception' (309). The suggestion is that were Jane to see Kendra's humiliation and Juan's shaky confidence, her 'take' would be to that extent '*accurate*, which for Murdoch implies that the effort to grasp, to see, has been informed by justice, love, moral imagination and a related form of attentiveness (suggested by the reference to "moral imagination" and "moral effort"...)' (309). 'Just and loving' seeing is once again simply *accurate* seeing, and accurate seeing is empirically accurate determination of details; so

we are still very close to Driver and Millgram. (And a key problem again is that seeing (say) Juan's shaky confidence is perfectly compatible with simple indifference to him, or even with taking delight in drawing on the perception to humiliate him.)

Brief remarks of Blum's two pages later do slightly complicate his view. In a sentence I have already quoted approvingly he writes: 'Some persons are quite perceptive about other people's vulnerabilities that can be exploited for personal gain or maliciousness' (311). This rightly implies (in tension with his earlier remarks) that the *mere accuracy* of Jane's perception of those 'genuine truths' about Kendra and Juan does not warrant describing her perception as 'informed by justice, love, moral imagination and a related form of attentiveness'. Unfortunately, Blum here observes only that such persons do not have a 'just and loving attentiveness...that yield(s) a fuller and truer picture of' the other (311). He has nothing positive to say about what this 'fuller and truer picture' might involve, although since the malicious person is said to grasp only 'some' genuine truths, the suggestion apparently still in play is that the picture will be made fuller and truer by the addition of *more* 'genuine truths' about the other. But if that *is* the suggestion, it is (once again) very implausible: the malicious exploiter of another's perceived vulnerabilities does not have a 'just and loving attentiveness' simply because he has such a fuller picture of the other's psychology. 'More details', as we have already seen, do not by themselves take someone a millimetre closer to just and loving attentiveness. So Blum actually takes us no further here than Driver or Millgram took us.<sup>xiv</sup>

A footnote of Blum's in the passage about 'attention as grasp', however, *does* hint at a very different understanding of the stance of Murdochian attention. 'Murdoch sometimes understands this focus or attentiveness', writes Blum, 'as a kind of receptiveness, an idea she derives from Simone Weil' (310, n. 6). Well, by contrast with 'sometimes', I suggest that *what matters most* in Murdoch's idea of attention lies in this direction that Blum finds worth indicating only in a footnote. Richard Moran offers a pointer in a similar direction: '...when its object is a particular person, "attending" also means to accompany, to be present, to serve' (Broackes 2012, 194). Admittedly, by themselves Blum's hint and Moran's pointer do not take us very far. A story recounted by Martha Nussbaum can –

though only partly wittingly – help us go further in the direction indicated by that hint and pointer, and so towards a clearer appreciation of some important elements of Murdochian attention that are missed by the related readings of it considered so far.

Nussbaum recollects being invited to lunch at Iris Murdoch's house in North Oxford, after a conference in New York where Nussbaum had given a talk on Murdoch's work:

I went round to the house, very nervous and awkward, and sat for two hours being scrutinized, as I felt it, by her sharp probing eyes. We talked about Proust and Henry James, about postmodernism and current developments in ethical thought, about Charles Taylor whom she admired, and R.M. Hare whom she did not. All the while, I felt that her very intense gaze went, as it were, straight through me, to something that was not me at all, but to which I was somehow related. ... She fixed me with her eyes and went on, eating pate absent-mindedly with her fingers... I had no doubt... that Murdoch could have described me, after an hour, far more precisely than any lover of mine after some years.... But I think that there is something more to loving vision than just seeing. There is, for example, a willingness to permit oneself to be seen. There is also a willingness to stop seeing, to close one's eyes before the loved one's imperfections. There is also a willingness to be, for a time, an animal or even a plant, relinquishing the sharpness of creative alertness before the presence of a beloved body. (Nussbaum 2012, 152)

Two themes of this passage are in tension. One theme echoes the main point I made about Driver and Millgram. Nussbaum expressly recognizes that Murdoch's 'sharp probing eyes' may have generated the most refined concepts for precisely describing the 'particularities and foibles' of the 'very nervous and awkward' guest 'fixed' under her gaze – concepts more refined, precise and accurate, Nussbaum implies (perhaps with some exaggeration), than any that her lovers of some years might have come up with.<sup>xv</sup> Nussbaum's description of how Murdoch 'saw' her with those 'sharp, probing eyes' crystallizes almost perfectly *Millgram's* description of Murdochian 'loving attention'.<sup>xvi</sup> But it is obvious that loving attention is not at all what Nussbaum felt in being thus scrutinized; and that she did not is surely wholly apposite in response to a gaze with the

character she ascribes to Murdoch's. Nussbaum is quite right to explicitly resist equating a 'loving gaze', or loving vision, with accurate, even penetratingly accurate, determinations of its (human) object.

Nussbaum does not have to be read as saying that Murdoch *the philosopher* equates these things. She may be pointing up a disconnect between the loving vision spoken of by Murdoch the philosopher, and the character of the 'seeing' she felt to be exemplified by Murdoch the woman on this occasion. But either way Nussbaum does better than either Millgram or Driver, who not only think Murdoch equates loving vision with penetratingly precise accuracy of observation but who themselves endorse the equation. Nussbaum certainly does not herself endorse it. I think she also probably doesn't ascribe such an equation to Murdoch the philosopher, but what I go on to say does not depend on that being so.

Nussbaum says she felt that Murdoch, looking at her with that 'sharp, probing' gaze, did not really see *her* at all. If still higher resolution of scrutiny is not the answer, then what *does* Nussbaum think 'really looking' – looking in a way that would indeed see *her* – might require? Nussbaum's (admittedly very brief) observations on that score are both intriguing and puzzling. 'I think', she writes, 'that there is something more to loving vision than just seeing.' But what 'more', exactly? Not the obvious fact that Murdoch is already using 'vision' in a familiarly extended sense, in that it can for example include the discernment effected by (say) *hearing*, too, and also 'the behavior of other persons as viewed through moral or morally informed categories' (Blum 2012, 308). Nussbaum clearly takes *that* point for granted. What she actually says presses in a different direction:

There is, for example, a willingness to permit oneself to be seen. There is also a willingness to stop seeing, to close one's eyes before the loved one's imperfections. There is also a willingness to be, for a time, an animal or even a plant, relinquishing the sharpness of creative alertness before the presence of a beloved body. (152)

'To let oneself be seen', 'to stop seeing', 'to relinquish the sharpness of creative alertness': on the face of it these do not seem to be matters of *vision* at all. So why does



Nussbaum present these things as instances of what more there is to loving vision than just seeing? (In saying that loving vision is ‘more’ than just seeing, Nussbaum implies that it *does* involve seeing, but something more as well.) Let us take a hint from Nussbaum’s insistence that despite Murdoch’s precise registering of her (Nussbaum’s) details, Murdoch did not really see *her* at all – ‘her intense gaze went...straight through me’. What Nussbaum says affords a critical perspective on the shared limitation of Driver’s, Millgram’s, Blum’s and (a bit differently) Clarke’s accounts of Murdochian attention. They all try to shoehorn seeing D truly, lovingly, justly into more highly focused registering of details (or facts or properties). They render ‘attending to D’ in terms of ascertaining details or facts *about* D. But Murdochian attention is not seeing something *about* another – seeing her more truly because one has come to register more truths *about* her. It is, instead, an orientation *to her*. (As we saw earlier, this also doesn’t mean seeing her ‘in her unbounded particularity and complexity’.)

Nussbaum says loving vision is ‘more than’ just seeing. I take it that the seeing she thinks is exceeded by loving vision includes the kind of seeing she ascribes to Murdoch in North Oxford: the identifying of details or features that would enable Murdoch to describe Nussbaum better than Nussbaum’s lovers could. The hint I want to follow is that ‘letting oneself be seen’, ‘stopping seeing’, ‘relinquishing the sharpness of creative alertness’, are elements of what is needed for really attending to another.<sup>xvii</sup> And this – to anticipate – will lead us in the direction of those other connotations of attention gestured at by Blum and Moran: attention as a kind of receptiveness, and as accompanying, being present at or to, waiting-on, serving, answering to.

I shall comment first on ‘being present to’ and then on ‘waiting-on’. Consider this from David Velleman on love: ‘(Love) arrests our tendencies toward emotional self-protection from another person, tendencies to draw ourselves in and close ourselves off from being affected by him. Love disarms our emotional defenses; it makes us vulnerable to the other’ (Velleman 1999, 361). (Of course that disarming of our emotional defenses also often leads us to put them up again very quickly when we become aware of just how vulnerable our love makes us.) This ‘disarming’ just is a matter of becoming ‘exposed’ to

another – ‘letting oneself be seen’, in Nussbaum’s phrase. But then love’s disarming is a mode of *becoming present to* the other, working against the tendency to ‘close oneself off’ from others by raising those defenses against them. Of course the defenses can often be carefully contrived to *look like* ways of being present: setting oneself as the Figure of Authority who commands and controls, as the Dutiful and Obedient child, as the Boisterous Joker, and so on. We often undertake to stage-manage the ways we will be seen, taking pains to see that they do not escape our management of them – which of course in various ways they often do. Nussbaum’s *really* ‘letting oneself be seen’ is different, linking to love as attending in the sense of ‘being present’. One thing still not quite clear, though, is why this connotation of attending is a mode of *vision*. If attending as ‘being present to’ involves letting down those defenses which block one from being seen by the other, isn’t that a matter of *being seen by* the other, rather than of *seeing* her? How, then, does attention as ‘being present’ link to attention as vision, *seeing*?

Velleman is explicit that the two are interdependent:

This hypothesis [that love makes us vulnerable] would explain why love is an exercise in “really looking”, as Murdoch claims. Many of our defenses against being emotionally affected by another person are ways of not seeing what is most affecting about him. This contrived blindness to the other person is among the defenses that are lifted by love, with the result that we really look at him, perhaps for the first time, and respond emotionally in a way that’s indicative of having really seen him.’ (361)

Many of our defenses against being affected by another are *also* ways of not seeing him: the defense I put up to block his affecting me simultaneously blocks my seeing of him. Stanley Cavell is also explicit about this reciprocity: ‘...recognizing a person depends upon allowing oneself to be recognized by him’ (Cavell 1969, 279).<sup>xviii</sup> Cavell clearly isn’t speaking of ‘factual’ recognition – coming into possession of information one lacked: I thought AB was in France, but as this person moves closer the features clarify and I recognize AB. *That* I could do while myself hidden. As Cavell puts it, the ignorance that is overcome by what he is here calling recognition is ‘ignorance which is not to be cured by information (because it is not caused by lack of information)’ (314); Velleman

in the passage just quoted is working with a similar kind of 'blindness' and 'seeing'. Driver, Millgram and Blum all miss this with their focus on attention to detail, as if what is at issue in Murdochian attending - seeing 'lovingly and justly' - is either actually acquiring more information or setting oneself to acquire it. But it is not so. M at first sees D as 'pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses'. *In so seeing* D, M walls herself behind class prejudice and maternal jealousy in a way that protects her from the exposure of being present to D. The mode of her false seeing of D is *also* the enacting of her self-protection against exposure. The barrier against being affected by D is thus Janus-faced in the way Velleman describes: it blocks her from being seen by D, and blocks D from being seen by her.

When M 'looks again', that barrier is lifted and she sees D as 'not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful'. As noted earlier, these are re-descriptions of D, not new empirical details against an unchanged background: M's 'ignorance' - her having failed to see D truly - is not 'cured by information' (what is the information?). Her orientation to D has changed, and that change involves her having let down her defenses against D. If this fits with Stanley Cavell's observation that '...recognizing a person depends upon allowing oneself to be recognized by him' (279), the fit may seem tested by Murdoch's setting up of her example, where D herself is kept out of the picture: how does M's recognizing of D depend on her allowing herself to be recognized by D if D is absent? Well, her orientation to D is now one that *would* indeed allow D to recognize her if D were present, simply in that it is now free of those defenses blocking her from such recognition by D. As Cavell is careful to put it: 'recognizing a person is dependent on *allowing* oneself to be recognized by him' - not on actually being thus recognized. That D is in fact absent then does not matter as far as this point is concerned.

Let me dwell a moment longer on the significance of the fact that what M sees when she looks again at D is not further empirical details against an unchanged background. There certainly is a kind of self-protection against one's vulnerability that can lead to one

missing empirical details one would otherwise have registered. I refuse the invitation to the party because of my timidity in the face of Fred's casual arrogance, and so I miss out on discovering he has had a breakdown. In this case my self-defensiveness is indeed the cause of a continuing ignorance that could indeed be 'cured by information' – you did go to the party and you tell me about Fred the following morning. That is not what Murdoch has in mind, and neither has Velleman or Cavell. So when Velleman says 'Many of our defenses against being emotionally affected by another person are ways of not seeing what is most affecting about him', by 'ways of not seeing' he means *modes* of not seeing, rather than *efficient causes* of failing to do so. My not going to the party is an *efficient cause* of my failing to (come to) know that Fred has had a breakdown; it is not a *mode* of failing to see him. Likewise, M's snobbishness *could* lead her to have some empirically false beliefs about D – that she votes Labour perhaps – but her seeing of D as pert and common is a *mode* of false-because-snobbish seeing of D, not a matter of her ascribing details to D that can be determined as empirically false independently of *that way or mode* – roughly, a jealous and snobbish way – of seeing D. Equally, that failure to see D, or false seeing of her, is not 'cured' by M's acquisition of information but by her coming to see D in a different way – namely, lovingly and justly. Murdoch says: 'Moral change comes from an *attention* to the world whose natural result is a decrease in egoism through an *increased sense of the reality of*, primarily, other people, but also other things' (Murdoch 1992, 52 – second italics are mine). 'An increased sense of the reality of' D is a striking description of what is effected in a 'truer' seeing of D that is not a matter of coming to see or know more details or facts about D.

So much, then, for teasing out Nussbaum's hint: that 'letting oneself be seen' is a condition of truly seeing. This teasing out has helped us see how the connotation of attending as 'being present' illuminates Murdochian attention. Let me now comment briefly on attending as 'waiting-on'. In fact, letting oneself be seen by another in the sense that involves undefensive exposure is already a kind of waiting-on the other – a receptiveness or patience in relation to the other. But there is also more to the idea of waiting-on in connection with receptiveness. Megan Lavery says: 'M's second description of D implies greater vulnerability in her relationship with D' (Lavery 2007,

100). This is at least because the first description *functioned* to keep D at a distance from her – or, as we can equally well put it, contrived to block her from D and D from her. Her second description reflects an openness *to D* – and openness to, exposure to, vulnerability to, are all recognizably ideas in similar territory. Of course there is also a way of being open, exposed, vulnerable to someone or something that is quite independent of one's attending at all to that someone or something: exposure to the sniper's bullet, the gossip's tongue, or the common cold, for example. But the vulnerability Lavery speaks of is evidently interdependent with a mode of attentiveness-to. Her seeing of D is now more responsive *to D*, meaning that the reality of D now shapes her seeing of D to an extent it previously did not. The way she now sees D is thus more open – more exposed – to the reality of D; and that is precisely the form or mode of her vulnerability to D. That can also be put by saying that her seeing of D 'waits on' D to an extent it did not; to use the term from Blum's footnote again, it is more 'receptive' to the reality of D than it was.

This aspect of loving attention as waiting-on in a way that involves greater receptiveness to reality thus also further emphasizes 'an increased sense of the reality of' another as integral to Murdochian attention. Among other passages from Murdoch that give expression to this idea are these: 'Love is the imaginative recognition of...otherness' (Murdoch 1997, 216); and: 'Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real. Love...is the discovery of reality' (Murdoch 1997, 215). These related formulations about attention also illuminate Murdoch's potentially puzzling insistence that 'if I attend properly I will have no choices' (Murdoch 1997, 331), because right action will flow from my attending. To find one's response necessitated by one's loving attention is to find the reality of (for example) another human being in his need fully and 'compulsively present to the will' (1997, 331). The modalities of moral necessity – 'I can't', 'I must', 'I have to' – directly register this 'increased sense of the reality' of another. We do not always so see and respond. As Raimond Gaita puts it: 'Generally perception is not so clear and full and action not so pure. A sense of obligation steps into the breach (Gaita 1999, 276)'.

I end by pressing further still the implications of the pattern of connotations of attention we have been considering. A man in the unemployment queue may be not only desperate, but ashamed, humiliated and angry at still having no job and being unable to support his family; and he prepares himself for the usual attitude from those behind the counter. It's not that they don't follow the rules, give him his entitlements – they usually do. Nor are they hostile or overtly condescending; they are mostly just bland, casually indifferent. But this time there is a different person behind the counter, who responds in a different way. Every detail – how she looks at him, the tone and pitch of her voice, the angle of her shoulders, the inclination and slight forward tilt of her head in listening (*really* listening) to him, and even how she hands money to him – every inflexion of her body constitutes an aspect of the way she is present to the man. Two names for the manner of her attending to him might be 'gentleness' and 'tenderness'.<sup>xix</sup> Her gentleness and tenderness are then crucial *modes* of her presence to the man; and they are equally forms of receptiveness to, and appreciation or acknowledgement of, the reality of this man standing before her.<sup>xx</sup> (It is relevant here, too, that the man thus attended to may find himself affirmed and nourished by this acknowledgment.) But this mode of attention is perhaps not, in however extended a sense we use the word 'vision', a matter of vision or seeing. Here is one reason for thinking this. Imagine someone witness to the gentle and tender manner of the woman behind the counter. Perhaps this witness finds himself chastened by what he witnesses – because his own brusque inattentiveness in related contexts is brought home to him – and motivated to respond differently on similar occasions thereafter. One possibility, though, is that when the time comes he discovers he simply cannot respond in the same spontaneous way she did – those bodily inflexions simply do not animate and inform his response as they do hers. Perhaps he can go *some* way in their direction, but only so far. If he feels chastened by *this* discovery, it is scarcely because he thinks there is something he cannot *see* here. He certainly thinks himself that there is some failure, or at least a serious limitation, in how he attends, how he is present, to those others, by comparison with the way the woman behind the counter is so. But it seems quite wrong to think of this as a failure in his seeing. It seems instead much more natural to imagine him thinking his problem to be that he can *only* see: that in relating to the other, he cannot express in the inflexions of his body what he sees – and so

he can't *attend* to another as this woman does. In that case, he seems to be recognizing in such gentleness and tenderness a kind of attending as presence-to, waiting-on and acknowledgment of another, that escapes description in terms of vision or seeing, even in the extended sense we have been working with. The (non-visual) inflexions of the body themselves here seem to play a crucial role in carrying attention.

## **Conclusion**

The common reading of Murdochian attention explored earlier is superficial because it tries to assimilate Murdochian attention to a certain conception of attending-as-knowing – attending as acquiring, or as setting oneself to acquire, more information.<sup>xxi</sup> I have tried to bring out how differently we need to understand Murdochian vision if we are to appreciate the real, and radical, implications of her idea of attention.

The clues we followed up from Moran and from Blum's footnote have led us further than we might have expected. We have found that Murdochian attention as 'just and loving vision' involves being present to another in a way that includes 'letting oneself be seen or recognized'. Beyond that, we found that attending as waiting-on helped give shape to Murdochian talk of attention as greater receptiveness to reality, and perhaps even as an increased sense of the reality of someone or something. And beyond that again, I suggested that there are forms of Murdochian attention crucially mediated by the expressive inflexions of the human body which, while sustaining the link with responsiveness to reality, resist being thought of as achievements of vision, even in the extended sense of vision we have been using.

In describing these last – bodily-inflected – modes of response as forms of 'Murdochian' attention, I do not say that Murdoch herself explicitly embraces or explores them. She does not. I think the reason for that, briefly, is her inheritance of Plato's inadequate appreciation of the role played by the expressive inflexions of the body in constituting our sense of loving and being loved.<sup>xxii</sup> Even so, at least some of the resources for

acknowledging this further ‘reach’ of Murdochian attention are arguably available to us in Murdoch’s own work.<sup>xxiii</sup>

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Murdoch often mentions and even quotes Weil without referencing a source. When she does cite a source, mainly in Murdoch 1992, it is almost always the *Notebooks*.

<sup>ii</sup> I think one among various reasons for this is a conception of truth as essentially a property of representations, often assumed as part of the background against which Murdoch’s idea of attention is understood. But I can’t justify that suggestion here, nor directly explore the limitations of that conception of truth.

<sup>iii</sup> This essay expands on footnote 4 of Cordner (2014, 130).

<sup>iv</sup> Murdoch focuses mainly on then-contemporary exemplars of this deflection – existentialism and Hare-type prescriptivism. But she is also alive to historical antecedents, one of them Kant, who thinks of moral difficulty as essentially executive and not epistemic – a difficulty not of *seeing* morally clearly but of acting on what we can (easily enough) see. (It’s true that some inroads into this outlook have been made *via* reflection on ‘thick’ ethical concepts, but they have in fact not penetrated very far, and attempts to link them with Murdoch’s concerns have been sketchy and not very influential. See Broackes 2012: 15 – 18.) “Vision and Choice in Morality” (1956) is an early Murdochian sketch of the moral importance of vision and the limitations of the ‘choice’ model of morality. “The Idea of Perfection” (1964), containing the example of M and D (see below), is a key essay in her development of this theme.

<sup>v</sup> Here I elide two sentences from Murdoch’s text, in which she asserts that the change in M is not in any of her overt behavior, but ‘happens entirely in her mind’. While Murdoch emphasizes this ‘anti-behaviourist’ point as important when she introduces the example, it plays no role in my discussion. (In fact it recedes into the background even in Murdoch’s later references back to the example, and my own view, on which I do not rely here, is that it plays little or no role in the example’s main lessons. Broackes (2012, 47) says something similar.)

<sup>vi</sup> Lawrence Blum has pointed to an occasional tension in Murdoch’s use of ‘attention’. Murdoch says that attention is ‘seeing lovingly and justly’, which in turn is ‘seeing D as she really is’. But she also speaks of attention as the *effort* to counteract illusion and so to see truly; and efforts can fail. So on this second way of speaking, but not the first, one can genuinely attend and yet still not ‘see (another) as she really is’ (Blum: 2012, 311). Blum thinks Murdoch’s Platonic inclination to think of the Good as exerting ‘a magnetic pull’ – so genuine efforts to attend will tend to be rewarded – leads her to speak mostly in



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the first way and so to overlook this occasional tension in her use of the term. I'm mostly going to pass by this tension, as it does not bear on my discussion.

<sup>vii</sup> The relation of these remarks to the rest of Driver's essay is not easy to determine. Murdoch never uses the term 'particularist', but Driver mostly seems to read her as treating just the issues discussed by contemporary particularists and their opponents, but as doing so rather imprecisely because she doesn't explicitly frame them that way.

<sup>viii</sup> The reference of Driver's word 'detail' is not confined to small or trivial matters. It ranges over any features or properties of what is attended to.

<sup>ix</sup> Perhaps it is better – less misleading – to say it gets us further at *some* truth, however trivial or uninteresting, about the object or situation, rather than at 'the' truth.

<sup>x</sup> Archbishop Pell later expressed himself in ways that may well have reflected some changes in how he saw things.

<sup>xi</sup> It is of course possible that discovering a new detail about another could play a role in prompting the kind of re-orientation Murdoch envisages M undergoing. But loving attention is still something different from what might thus prompt it.

<sup>xii</sup> The humility of recognizing that one never has another 'taped'? – yes, that makes sense and is important. But it seems Clarke thinks that somehow implies, or perhaps presupposes, the intelligibility of seeing the other 'in her unbounded particularity and complexity'. It does not.

<sup>xiii</sup> The last phrase echoes the occasional oscillation in Murdoch's use of 'attention' that Blum points out (see n. 6 above) between actually seeing something as it really is and making the effort to do so.

<sup>xiv</sup> Two commentators who avoid the misunderstanding I've been sketching are: Carla Bagnoli (2012, 216-217); and Megan Laverty (2007, 99-104). Laverty also speaks about M's transformed orientation to D in terms related to mine below.

<sup>xv</sup> It does not actually matter for my purposes whether Nussbaum actually read Murdoch's gaze aright. It is enough that there can be gazes with the character Nussbaum here ascribes to Murdoch's. But for simplicity's sake, I am accepting Nussbaum's 'take' on Murdoch's 'intense gaze' on that occasion.

<sup>xvi</sup> Nussbaum implies that Murdoch looked at her with 'the gaze of art' as that is represented in Murdoch's novel *The Black Prince*. I don't think any view about 'the gaze of art' (whatever that might be) should be ascribed to *Murdoch* as a philosophical view just because it appears in one of her novels. But anyway the link Nussbaum makes to such a view has no bearing on my comments on what Nussbaum says in the quoted passage.

<sup>xvii</sup> I am thus leaving it open whether, as Nussbaum implies, attention *does* require the intense perceptiveness that enabled Murdoch to describe her better than her lovers could – and just requires something 'more' as well. My own view is that it does not require the former at all. But in any case Nussbaum's description of Murdoch's actual seeing of her seems to suggest that the 'something more' betokens a radically different orientation from that intense focus.

<sup>xviii</sup> The theme of acknowledgment in Cavell's thinking in fact has a good deal in common with Murdochian attention.

<sup>xix</sup> There are of course other forms of tenderness and gentleness – the tenderness of lovers for example. Different forms need speaking to in rather different ways.

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<sup>xx</sup> This example raises further questions I cannot resolve here. Social and professional role-mediated relationships carry within them limitations in the exposure of one to another. The one behind the employment counter, or a counselor or nurse or teacher, cannot while remaining within her role be fully personally exposed to the other. Yet this limitation of exposure need not be a matter of what I earlier called seeking to ‘manage’ how one is seen by another. (It *can* be put to that purpose, but does not have to be.) Then the limitation carried in the role does not obstruct attention, but it does partly shape the form attention takes there. Of course in some contexts a ‘professional’ – a counsellor, say – might find herself moved her to breach the boundaries of the role-relationship. There are difficult questions about when this might warrant doing, and what risks might then be run in any particular case.

<sup>xxi</sup> I’m not resisting *any and all* links between attending and knowing. Murdoch speaks of love as ‘knowledge of the individual’. Knowing, one might say, takes many forms. It matters how one elaborates or speaks to use of the word ‘know’ in connection with attending. I’ve made various connections – with recognizing and being present-to, for example. Another potentially fruitful connection is with ‘acknowledgement’ (see n. 18 above).

<sup>xxii</sup> That blunt double assertion – about Plato and about this aspect of Murdoch’s relation to him – of course calls for justification. I try to provide it elsewhere, in “Plato, love and the body” (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>xxiii</sup> I am grateful to Drew Carter, Yana Canteloupe, and an anonymous reviewer for *Sophia*, for very helpful comments.

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