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## Research Article

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# Laying One's Cards on the Table: Experiencing Exile and Finding Our Feet in Moral Philosophical Encounters

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**Abstract:** Engaging with the philosophical writings of Iris Murdoch, we submit that there are difficulties associated with providing a good description of morality that are intimately connected with difficulties in understanding other human beings. We suggest three senses in which moral philosophical reflection needs to account for our understanding of others: (1) the failure to understand someone is not merely an intellectual failure, but also engages us morally; (2) the moral question of understanding is not limited to the extent to which we understand a particular person, but also presents itself in how we picture difficulties in understanding people; and (3) “philosophical pictures of morality” fundamentally shape the conceptual framework we use to investigate morality, as well as the analysis of morality we find illuminative and satisfactory. Exploring the implications of these claims, we ask what it means to think of others as the same, or as different, from ourselves. We then consider the ethical significance of finding, or not finding, our feet in our encounters with others, dwelling on how the metaphor of movement reveals one way in which we are never at peace in the exploration of morality.

**Keywords:** love, attention, understanding, particularity, moral encounter, Iris Murdoch, Martin Buber, Ludwig Wittgenstein

## 1 Introduction

Are people in general easy or difficult to understand? The question at first glance, in its admittedly odd generality, does not appear to be very philosophical or of any philosophical interest. Yet the skeptical question, as to whether it is possible to understand anyone other than oneself, or of precisely what it is that enables one to understand others, is firmly rooted in the philosophical tradition. The question, therefore, not only of whether we can understand others, but of how difficult it may be, and of what this difficulty might consist in, should arrest our attention as philosophers.

This consideration gains even more weight in conjunction with the final remarks of Iris Murdoch's article “Vision and Choice in Morality.” There, she objects to the metaethical idea that it is possible to provide a philosophical analysis of the meaning of moral language without taking a stance on what matters to oneself morally. Against this idea, she writes,

Here, if we abandon the notion of pure formula, we shall be able once again to see how deeply moral attitudes influence philosophical pictures of morality. (The present writing is doubtless no exception.) There is perhaps in the end no peace

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between those who think that morality is complex and various, and those who think it is simple and unitary, or between those who think that other people are usually hard to understand and those who think they are usually easy to understand. All one can do is try to lay one's cards on the table.<sup>1</sup>

Her reflection raises questions about what it means to continue doing moral philosophy *after* one has realized just “how deeply moral attitudes influence philosophical pictures of morality.” Nevertheless, those who have not engaged with Murdoch's thought may feel uncertain about what it means to think of that claim itself. Why does she seek to illuminate the influence of moral attitudes on philosophical *pictures* of morality? Does this mean that she is willing to abstain from providing a view of morality herself? Seeking to understand Murdoch here, it might be helpful to read this remark in the light of other ideas which are central to her philosophy. One such idea is found in her remark that “*man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture*” and her consequent suggestion that “moral philosophy must attempt to describe and analyse” this process.<sup>2</sup> A version of this idea resurfaces in her book *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*<sup>3</sup> in which Murdoch herself can be said to unfold the fundamentally moral attitudes to life, oneself, and others, conveyed in philosophers' pictures of the human subject's relation to reality. These passages point to the realization that the ways in which we philosophically come to depict the human being are also ways of picturing ourselves. Such pictures do not just serve to depict *what is*, what we are, but also provide instruction about *how we should be*. They are, as Stanley Cavell has said with reference to Ralph Emerson and Friedrich Nietzsche, ways of making “ourselves intelligible (to others, to ourselves).”<sup>4</sup> It is a virtue of Murdoch's work to have made clear how fundamentally moral such ways of making sense of ourselves are. Thus, her work shows just how interlinked our pictures of morality and our pictures of ourselves are. In so doing, she also identifies a need to attend to our ways of picturing morality if we are to avoid the risk of merely seeing the mirror image of ourselves in what we think of as morality.

It is a further virtue of Murdoch's writing to have realized that her own writing, as well as ours here, is “doubtless no exception” to this rule. The realization that our own writing in moral philosophy provides a philosophical picture of morality that is expressive of deeply moral attitudes, requires of us, as philosophers, that we ask how this may shape the conceptual framework we use to investigate morality, as well as the analysis of morality we find illuminative and satisfactory. We will return to this insight, “our moral philosophy always involves us in some form of self-understanding,” and the questions it raises for our own writing, at the end of the discussion. The focus of the bulk of our investigation, however, will be to survey the links that Murdoch forms, in the quote above, between thinking about *morality* as “complex and various,” and perceiving *people* as “usually hard to understand,” and thinking of morality as “simple and unitary” and perceiving people as “usually easy to understand.” We explore how different understandings of morality reveal possibilities and limitations in how we understand our relations to others. We ask what understanding about morality can be gained from connecting our understanding of the central features of morality to how we are to understand other people? Furthermore, we ask how our difficulties in providing a good description of morality relate to our struggles with understanding other human beings.

To bring out the relevance Murdoch assigned to questions about how we understand each other in our depictions of morality, we consider both what meaning it might have in a particular context to say that people are either easy or hard to understand, and what it meant for Murdoch, herself, to connect such sayings with thinking of morality as being either simple and unitary or complex and various. Thus, we are interested not only in elucidating *what* she says, but also in understanding *her*. In the first section, we indicate some limitations in certain ways of thinking of people as usually being easy to understand in social scientific research and the way in which this may lead one to think of morality as simple and unitary. Here we mainly draw on readings of Murdoch in connection with Wittgenstein-inspired philosophers who, partly

<sup>1</sup> Murdoch, “Vision,” 98.

<sup>2</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 75.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Cavell, *Cities*, 24, 222, see also 381.

in dialogue with her, have brought up questions about understanding in the Anglo-American philosophical tradition.<sup>5</sup> In the second section, we read Murdoch in relation to more continental strands of thought, and thinkers who, partly in response to the limitations addressed in the first section, think of understanding others as utterly complex, or even impossible. We show how our reading of Murdoch can serve to bridge discourses of understanding in these differing fields of philosophy, but also how the attempt to serve as arbiter between different ways of understanding ourselves appears to be in itself misguided. In the third section, Murdoch's suggestion that perhaps, in the end, there "is no peace" between different understandings presents a different starting point for exploring some ethical implications that her understanding of morality has for moral philosophy. We consider these in relation to Wittgenstein's suggestion that peace indeed is a desirable endpoint in philosophy. In the fourth and final section, we link her remarks on understanding to a Platonist imagery of the philosopher in search of the good to indicate how we may take reflections on finding, or not finding, our feet in encounters with others further, and to reveal one way in which we are never at peace in the exploration of morality.

## 2 On thinking people are easy to understand: Something or someone

In an everyday context, saying that someone is easy to understand may be an expression of relief. We may say it of a person we easily get along with, with whom no conflicts seem to arise. Murdoch's talk of people who are "*usually* easy to understand," however, indicates more general attitudes concerning the possibility of understanding others in philosophy and moral theory. In what philosophical and academic settings can such an attitude be argued to arise?

One possible context for such a view originates in works in the behavioural and social sciences. In these works the notion of "understanding" surfaces but seems to occasion no need for the researcher to consider the special moral problems facing us in understanding others. Instead, understanding something is equated with explaining an occurrence.<sup>6</sup> This move occurs in descriptions of moral psychology in descriptive ethics, in which the question of understanding is substituted with the notion of explanation. For social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, for instance, "understanding" what he, following Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith, calls a "built-in moral sense,"<sup>7</sup> is taken to consist in *explaining* the psychological processes behind feelings of intuitive approval or disapproval.<sup>8</sup>

Studying people's reactions to vignettes including incestuous relations or the bringing of a piece of a cadaver from one's work in a laboratory home for dinner so as not to waste good meat, he and his colleagues are interested in the underlying psychological mechanism that makes people say of this behaviour that it is either "wrong" or "ok."<sup>9</sup> No interest is given to what separates one person's judgement that "Incest is wrong" from another's. Rather it is the common features of their judgement, a search for unity beyond apparent differences, such as the possibility of empirically securing the tendency of a vignette to elicit a specific response, which structures the investigation. Thus, for Haidt, there appears to be no specific problems connected with understanding *people*, or specifically understanding *someone*. People in this sense are easy to understand because there is nothing there to understand, nothing in particular that requires understanding. What stands in need of explaining is a *something*, such as the "human moral sense," which is assumed to reside in an impersonal and general mechanism or a causal network.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Winch, "Can We;" and Hertzberg, "Limits," for more detailed analysis of these issues with which we are generally in agreement.

<sup>6</sup> For a historical orientation of the role of explanation and understanding in the natural and social sciences, see e.g. von Wright, *Explanation*, for a diagnosis.

<sup>7</sup> Haidt "The Emotional," 816.

<sup>8</sup> Haidt, "The Emotional;" and Haidt, *The Righteous*, 316.

<sup>9</sup> Haidt, *The Righteous*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 825; and cf. Haidt and Björklund, "Social," 186–7.

In contrast to Haidt, philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto explicitly suggests that it is vital in a historical explanation of human behaviour, that there be several meaningful perspectives on an event, what he dubs “points of view.”<sup>11</sup> The historical law of explanation for which he argues explains a person’s behaviour against the backdrop of their “world,” which in turn provides the relevant context for their “point of view.” Thus, Danto replaces the question of understanding someone with the notion of a logical explication of a general ontology of “points of view.” Human behaviour is here not only thought of as “complex and various,” and as something that needs to be explained against the backdrop of a “world,” or a “point of view,” but also as “simple and unitary.” And this is because its complexity, as such, functions as the law of explanation, i.e. the logical form that our understanding of human behaviour must take.

Although very different in kind, both these authors do away with the whole set of problems related to what it means to understand *someone*. There is nothing to understand because there is *no one* to understand. There is only *something* to be explained. In this way, they do not make a distinction between understanding *something* and understanding *someone*. To understand someone is, furthermore, reduced to a question of understanding something, generalizable features, a law-like system, an intentional structure, a point of view. They note, as it were, that the individual, as Murdoch says, “is contingent, full of private stuff and accidental rubble.”<sup>12</sup> These individual features of a person, however, are seen as largely irrelevant to the task of explicating the general form that understanding “the human moral sense” or “points of view” must take. Thus, they do not note that the individual, as Murdoch says, “must be accepted as such,” and is not to be “thought of as an embryonic rational agent, or in terms of some social theory.”<sup>13</sup> By treating the question of understanding, which is here reduced to a matter of finding the right explanation, as a question of knowledge, they also fail to take notice of the moral dimension of their own vision about what is central to the notion of understanding.

These attempts to reduce understanding “the human moral sense” or certain “points of views” to a matter of explaining can be contrasted with Peter Winch’s suggestion that in order to understand *someone* (and precisely not *something*), we need to do justice to their particularity. He writes in “Particularity and Morals” that “treating a person justly involves treating with seriousness his own conception of himself, his own commitments and cares, his own understanding of his situation and of what the situation demands of him.”<sup>14</sup> This view on the role of understanding other people was central to his perception of the human and social sciences, aligning him with the continental German hermeneutic tradition, that considered understanding as distinct from explanation.

Taking a “person’s conception of his commitments” seriously in such ways is, as Raimond Gaita continues to suggest,

to be able to find it intelligible that he should explore those commitments and cares with an increasingly deepened understanding. It is to find it intelligible that he could have a rich or impoverished inner life. It is to see him as a potential partner in that conversational space in which we are answerable to the demand or to the plea that we try to invest our thoughts and words with the authority of an individually achieved lucidity.<sup>15</sup>

These remarks, which in Gaita’s case are closely aligned with Murdoch’s writings, suggest that the task of understanding someone is not merely an intellectual task, a question of knowledge. It also engages us morally in that it invokes a realization of what it means to speak from within a relationship to another. The

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<sup>11</sup> Danto, “The Decline,” 79–80. The target of his view is not the kind of scientific naturalism Haidt exposes, but rather a psychology of identification. It consists, as Danto sees it, in taking “empathic leaps” into the world of the one whose actions one seeks to understand. This psychologism, he argues, is generally characteristic of *Verstehen* philosophy, in its claim that one should aim for an “internal understanding” of different perspectives, often based on trying to know “what it is to be that person.” (It is important to note that Danto fails to acknowledge that the psychology of identification has been relentlessly criticized within *Verstehen* philosophy, for instance by Edith Stein, Max Scheler, and Hans-Georg Gadamer.)

<sup>12</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 368.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Winch, “Particularity,” 177.

<sup>15</sup> Gaita, *Common*, 59.

other is someone who speaks to me, and to whom I can speak, with all that may be included in our repertoire of speech: such as telling the other something about myself, ordering or commanding them to do something, joking with or about them, silencing, praising, condemning, insulting, or comforting them. To understand *what* the other *says* I thus need to account for what the other thinks they are saying: What are they doing in saying it? I also need to consider what I think I am doing in responding to it in the way I do, and whether that is a responsible approach to *what they say*, and indeed to *them*.

Haidt's social psychological study, for example, does not only seem to describe what the research subjects say. It also *offers a corrective* to what they are doing when they are saying it. Instead of thinking, as the research subjects seem to do, that they are voicing a moral objection to incest, the researchers suggest that in actuality they are doing something else. They are, they propose, rationalizing a social intuition. Now, it is certainly not necessary for a scientist to accept or adopt any description a research subject would give of themselves, that is their self-understanding, as the only possible understanding of them that there is. It is also possible that the research subjects would come to concur with the scientist's statement and agree to stand corrected. If, however, there is a disagreement between research subject and researcher as to what understanding is the best understanding, simply by-passing the research subject's self-understanding can be seen as a failure to take seriously the authority they have as speakers in determining what is indeed a more lucid understanding of their situation.

The social scientists who attempt to explain "the human moral sense" or "points of views" can in that sense be reproached for not sufficiently considering the understanding the people whom they attempt to understand have of themselves. They speak with the intention of telling us "how things are" or "what morality, or understanding is." They do not, however, consider the contribution their own understanding and preconception as to how others should be understood makes to how they take things to be. By taking their task to be explaining the structure of understanding (as the thing to be understood), they reveal a blindness to the others' *vision* of life

as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversations.<sup>16</sup>

The criticism one can direct at Haidt and Danto is therefore twofold. Firstly, they subsume the individual under a general framework of understanding that may disregard the moral significance that the words and actions of another person has to them. Secondly, they remain unaware of, or do not explicitly address, the moral significance that their framework of understanding may have in terms of revealing their own attitude to others and to life.

These suggestions as to what is involved in understanding others also give us a different take on what our failures to understand someone might be. If we regard our difficulties in understanding primarily as intellectual questions, the difficulties we may perceive concern securing the correct method or procedure of understanding. What is the object of understanding? ("The moral sense" "Understanding?") What are the criteria of intelligibility or standards for understanding such and such an object? How can it be specified? What are the right techniques for extracting laws, how do we determine whether the structures we discern are correct, or responsive to what may widely be deemed to be our nature? Is there, for instance, only one structure for understanding, or should we consider the possibility of a plurality of networks, viewpoints? These we could say are primarily epistemological questions.

If we, however, consider the difficulty of understanding as connected with the ways in which we are attentive to another, of taking someone seriously and treating them justly, then the problems we are facing are not connected with *what* we are to understand, but are rooted in our own attentiveness to the other. They are, as Martin Buber suggested, responses to a "You," and to the moral demands that grow out of being addressed by a "You."<sup>17</sup> This involves us, firstly, in a recognition of the other as someone with whom I

<sup>16</sup> Murdoch, "Vision," 81.

<sup>17</sup> Buber, *I*. We are here departing from the more arcane "Thou" figuring in translations of Buber's work, using "You" which is closer to Buber's original German, "Du."



take my “stand in relation,”<sup>18</sup> whether the relation is to a “You” or an “It,” and, secondly, of the particular demands that standing in relation to a “You” makes on me. Connecting this thought back to Murdoch, we could say that one such demand involves my being hospitable to the thought that you have an independent existence, that you are not I, although we both share a world.

These considerations tie together the kind of criticism of other mind skepticism which Murdoch welcomed in the works of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, with her own suggestion that we discover reality and the individual through love. She summarizes Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's similar ways of dissolving skepticism in the following manner: “How do I reach the world? You are in the world, it is your world. (For this relief much thanks.)”<sup>19</sup> What these short remarks show is that the question posed by the skeptic is no real question, or that it is posed from a position in which no question could be asked. There is, in other words, no intellectual procedure by which to get from mind conceived as an instant flash of self-awareness,<sup>20</sup> to world. Our ways of speaking (of) our minds already presuppose a world, a past, a shared language, to count as thought.

The form of Murdoch's imagined dialogue, here, is more important than it first may seem. If we substituted “I” for “you,” we would not reach the same conclusion. “How do I reach the world? I'm in it, it is my world” does not offer the same kind of reassurance as “You are in the world.” (Rather it may offer us a different form of solipsism.)<sup>21</sup> If I only ask this question to myself, I may retreat into my world, as Descartes did.<sup>22</sup> I can start thinking of language as merely verbalizing my inner thoughts. If I consider the words posed to me by a “you,” however, as Wittgenstein or Heidegger posing the question to Murdoch, or Murdoch to me, these persons can draw me back into the world, by uttering those words, in response to my question. By doing that, “you” remind “me” of our sharing a world, and the sense in which one could say, in close contact with Heidegger's being-with-others, “The only way for me of being in the world is by being with others.” The only way of asking the question of how I reach the world is in a language we share. And thus, by showing that my question is no real question, you welcome me back to our world. You give me my world. In that sense “You are in the world,” both when you say those words to me, and when I reflect on you as both part of and transcending my world, offers reassurance. (I discover myself as a speaker.)

Nevertheless, the rebuttal of skepticism is not sufficient for Murdoch to bring into view how I may struggle to realize the ways in which you are in the world (as a response to you). Her speaking of the need to accept the reality of the other as independent of one's own wishes, in their “unutterable particularity,”<sup>23</sup> is not an attempt to overcome skepticism. (It is already overcome. There was nothing to overcome.) Rather, Murdoch pictures the difficulties we may experience here as a struggle with egoism. She speaks of love, which to her is one of the most central, if not *the* moral concept,<sup>24</sup> as involving us in the “extremely difficult realization that something other than yourself is real.”<sup>25</sup> In her famous discussion of M and her daughter in law D, where M asks whether she sees D as “vulgar” or “juvenile” because she is conventional, prejudiced, or a snob,<sup>26</sup> Murdoch suggests that we may sometimes need to “look again” in order to see another justly, i.e. see past descriptions that may be too self-centred. She opens for ways of acknowledging how one's own attitudes are constantly shaping the way one perceives the other. She emphasizes how the struggle to see clearly in such cases can be modelled as endless.<sup>27</sup> When seeking to understand *you*, I do not seek anything

<sup>18</sup> Buber, *I*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 187.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Murdoch on Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*. “I am my world.” Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 188.

<sup>22</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 186.

<sup>23</sup> Murdoch, “The Sublime,” 215.

<sup>24</sup> See Hopwood, “The Extremely;” and Murdoch, “On God,” 337.

<sup>25</sup> Murdoch, “The Sublime,” 215.

<sup>26</sup> Murdoch, “The Idea,” 312f.

<sup>27</sup> The point of the example is of course not that whenever we change our perception of another it is always for the better. The point is rather to acknowledge the ethical significance of considering how one's perception of the other may be revealing of one's self, and sometimes self-centredness.

specific in you that I may succeed or fail to understand. Rather I seek a certain kind of open-ended relationship, which may be difficult to establish and uphold.

### 3 On thinking people are hard to understand: Sameness and difference

Murdoch's talk about love as involving a difficult realization and an endless struggle suggests that among those who think that people are "usually easy to understand" or "usually hard to understand," she would fall among the latter. This view is supported by remarks such as,

It is very well to say that one should always attempt a full understanding and a precise description, but to say that one can always be confident that one has understood seems plainly unrealistic. There are even moments when understanding ought to be withheld.<sup>28</sup>

There are situations which are obscure and people who are incomprehensible, and the moral agent, as well as the artist, may find himself unable to describe something which in some sense he apprehends. Language has limitations and there are moments when if it is to serve us, it has to be used creatively, and the effort may fail.<sup>29</sup>

Compared to those who may be taken to subdue the interpersonal challenges involved in understanding, she brings out the fact that understanding is at times not to be had, and at other times might even be impossible. This brings her close to poststructuralist thinkers like Jacques Derrida. He warned against subsuming everything pictured to be human under the "same" or "similar," and instead urged us to look at how and where "differences" are made in language.<sup>30</sup> In a short response to hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, Derrida pointed out that an emphasis on consensus and understanding tends to underplay the role of misunderstanding in dialogue.<sup>31</sup> Gadamer had suggested that "good will" on behalf of the speakers was a presupposition for dialogue and understanding. Derrida asks whether

the precondition for *Verstehen*, far from being the continuity of *rapport* [i.e. the close and harmonious understanding of two people in a relationship that Gadamer had gestured at in speaking "of understanding the other" and "understanding one another"], is not rather the interruption of *rapport*, a certain *rapport* of interruption, the suspending of all mediation.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, but using other words, Robert Bernasconi and John Caputo give a radicalized reading of Derrida and emphasize the experience of *rupture*.<sup>33</sup> They claim that the only way in which we can respond attentively to the other is by realizing that we cannot understand, think, or describe the other without doing violence unto her. Only then can we save the other in her radical alterity. They do not stop at suggesting that understanding at times should not be *imposed*, but as Murdoch says withheld.<sup>34</sup> Dialogue itself appears to be *impossible*.

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<sup>28</sup> Murdoch, "Vision," 90.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Derrida, *Writing*. The appeal to difference over sameness has also become a commonplace move today in many political discussions, surfacing not the least in forms of identity politics, where various groups require to be recognized as different. We will not go into the view of moral life and understanding coming out of this thought here, as well as the quite different roles they assign to difference. We only note that if we take "difference" to speak to that which is opposite to "sameness" we run a similar risk of intellectualizing the problem of understanding. Here we are also not yet taking a stand on the differences between speaking about "difference" and "otherness," as we have seen different notions of both difference and the Other emerge in these discussions.

<sup>31</sup> Derrida, "Three," 54.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Bernasconi, "You;" and Caputo, *Radical*, 153–60.

<sup>34</sup> We read this as suggesting that we need to refrain from actively passing judgement in situations where we are uncertain what it is we understand, not to suggest that we can refrain from spontaneously apprehending a situation in a certain way.



Like Murdoch, Derrida questions a prevalent picture of understanding, and points to the vision of language and ethics that take form in it, as well as the features of language it leaves out. By centring on “understanding,” he suggests, the hermeneutic tradition has suppressed “misunderstandings.” By privileging “consensus” in dialogue, if only in the desire to understand, dissensus has been subdued.<sup>35</sup> Although understanding for the hermeneutic philosopher is not easy, they still, for Derrida, work on the presupposition of a considerable unity.

With Murdoch, however, we may also question what picture of language and ethics take form in Derrida's thinking. In a comment on his structuralist vision of language, she says that his vision of language is vast, in that meaning extends beyond anything a particular individual may say, “the whole of language determining every part of it.”<sup>36</sup> She adds that his vision “is awesome and impressive” and “may undermine our confidence in what we took to be our ‘mastery of language’ and our ability to say anything clearly, or to say what is *true*.”<sup>37</sup> She further describes his writing as “nightmarish prophetic theorising,”<sup>38</sup> which combines “fatalistic determinism” with “superior omniscience.”<sup>39</sup> She characterizes his arguments as appealing to “plausibly reinforced or dramatized half-truths or truisms: such as our realization that *of course* we are influenced by innumerable forces which are beyond our control and of which we are unconscious *and so* should come to see as illusions many aspects of our being in which we have had a naive belief.”<sup>40</sup> She suggests that this is a case where “truism, halftruth and shameless metaphysics join to deceive us.”<sup>41</sup>

This way of phrasing her critique helps to bring out the problems involved in the suspicious attitude towards dialogue that appear in Derrida's, Bernasconi's, and Caputo's writing. To speak of Derrida's “suspension of all mediation” as a half-truth, or to think of language being vast as a truism, is not to reject either claim as false. It is also not necessary to claim that it is half true and half false. Rather it is a recognition that what someone is inclined to say might be true in some contexts (for the half-truth), or true in such ways that we may not be able to imagine what it would be for it to be false (for the truism). The moment a half-truth or a truism can be said to be untrue is when one no longer sees the kind of context that would make it true, or make it a relevant and meaningful thing to say.<sup>42</sup>

With regards to the difficulty of understanding gestured at by Derrida, or the impossibility of dialogue, suggested by Bernasconi and Caputo, we can then say that the notion that we do not always understand in many ways is a truism.<sup>43</sup> We even quoted Murdoch saying something very much to the same effect. They capture the realization that dialogues at times break down. This realization is in some ways so trivial that it

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<sup>35</sup> Derrida, “Fichus,” 178.

<sup>36</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 188.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 472.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 185–6.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 188. Her criticism may seem harsh even to someone who did not take the time to try to understand Derrida, and perhaps even more so to someone who thinks Derrida has pointed to features of our existence that we would stand in need of understanding. Depending on one's own temperament, and preference for style, one may also react differently to the form of whole-sale rejection of poststructuralism Murdoch seems to offer. (See Milligan, “Murdoch,” for a reading that suggests she is closer to Derrida than these remarks propose.) Admittedly Murdoch is not a philosopher who necessarily speaks to everyone, as do of course few philosophers, if any. She is, as it were, an observant thinker, but she is not always a scrupulous reader. She is always polemical, which may attract some, but deter others. She shows, however, an unusual sensitivity to the tone of voice we are able to detect in pieces of philosophical writing. She is responsive to the temperament of the author of a text, in ways that may be educative for us all. It may, therefore, be important to attempt to understand the criticism Murdoch brings out in this fashion, and not merely reject it as overly polemical.

<sup>42</sup> To see something as true in a certain context is of course not the same as recognizing it as relevant or meaningful. “What is true” and “what is meaningful” thus do not always go together, but may do so at some points, and perhaps here at important points. That is, to recognize the truth of what Derrida says is perhaps better described as recognizing it as a meaningful criticism in certain contexts.

<sup>43</sup> We recognize that scholars following Derrida often lean on his argument as a transcendental insight into the conditions enabling dialogue. Misunderstanding or interruption can then ironically be seen as that which makes dialogue possible in the first place. Here we follow Murdoch and consider what it means to bring back such a transcendental insight to life. To what lived

perhaps needs not be uttered. It captures the rifts in the relation between you and I when, for instance, I hurt you unintentionally but you will not accept my apologies, or when I hurt you intentionally but would never concede that I did. It captures what goes on between us, when the meaning of our words could be condensed in descriptions, such as:

“I turn to you, you shut me out.”

“You search for consolation. I am unable to give it to you.”

“You try to reach me. I become more distant.”

“I tell you something painful. Your face becomes tense. You say, ‘I knew you would say that.’ My world falls apart.”

These descriptions catch on to quite ordinary experiences and situations. They also warrant other kinds of truisms. For instance, that all speech does not involve us in dialogue, or that dialogues may not only break down but sometimes also fade out. “My distance towards you grows as I stop trying.” “I no longer see a point in talking to you.” Why then announce the “interruption of rapport” or the “suspending of all mediation” with prophetic grandeur? Why claim that what unconditionally conditions dialogue is not goodwill, but the possibility of interruption?<sup>44</sup> Why question the “knowing in a dialogue that one has been perfectly understood or experiencing the success of confirmation?”<sup>45</sup> It is here that something that in one context may appear as a truism begins to look like a half-truth.

Certainly, dialogue *can*, as our ordinary cases made clear, involve ruptures between us. They may lead to the suspension and even repression of the other. Not acknowledging that breakdown is one end to dialogue, and that there is no one end to dialogue that secures it being a dialogue, is in that way a failure to take to heart the open-ended character of dialogue, or of understanding more generally. Imposing one’s understanding on another and taking this imposition as the only possible understanding available is a further denial of that same open-endedness. At least in the respect that in certain situations, but not all, not *I*, but *you* are the only judge to whether I have understood.

The realization that understanding should not be *imposed*, however, does not necessarily force us to conclude that dialogue is *impossible*, that any talk about reaching understanding in dialogue should be precluded. The words “I should not subsume you under my preferred system of explanation” or “I should not impose my understanding on you” may come alive as an *ethical* response to you. They speak to difficulties I may experience in relation to you (especially if you appear to me in the interpretation of a text). This response directs my attention to my *responsibility* for you. It asks me to acknowledge the multitude of ways in which I, in this particular instance, may no longer be responsive to you. Considering my own responsibility here points to concrete ways in which I in a conversation may lose sight of you as speaking to me. I may for instance grow defensive (“That wasn’t what I meant!”), assert my own understanding of our situation over yours (“This is how it is!”), or in other ways lose track of our joint interest in the conversation. I may begin to speak about my own vulnerability and sentimentality (“I feel so alone!”) instead of listening to you. My failures at being in dialogue with you may however also lead me to resort to *intellectual* hyperboles about the tragic separation of human beings: “We can never understand!” These ways of speaking give voice to common experiences of loss of contact, a failure to be in touch with the other, and the feelings of exasperation, disappointment, and abasement, which are often related to such experiences. They may, however, also become a Trojan horse in our relationship,<sup>46</sup> if they enable me to disregard my responsibility for you. If they avail me to step out of the relationship with you, half-truths not only abound, they may also turn to lies.

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contexts does this saying possibly respond? What are the ethical implications of taking this as the guiding image of interpersonal understanding? (We thank Nicholas Lawrence for pressing this issue.)

<sup>44</sup> Derrida, “Three,” 54.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>46</sup> For a good discussion of this see Mehmél, “Possibility.”

Accepted as an intellectual, even metaphysical stance, the suggestion that understanding is impossible, also easily conceals the manifold situations where we do find it possible to reach each other with our words. Think only of situations that could be described in words like:

“I lose face, you gracefully provide me with a way of keeping it.”

“I show a weakness, you see no reason to attack”

“I come to you in despair. I find comfort in your presence.”

“I tell you something painful. You look at me and say, ‘I knew you would say that.’ I feel relief. I feel your presence.”

To acknowledge that understanding is a complex matter, therefore, does not fundamentally point to the role played by *difference*, either in terms of individual differences between us, or the radical difference of the other's reality, in determining what makes understanding possible. It is rather the varying kinds of *difficulty* that confront us in understanding that allow us to see what our possibilities of being in dialogue are in different contexts, and where possible limits of understanding will be found. What can be seen as possible and impossible in our dialogues, therefore, cannot be decided in advance of particular dialogues, and the kinds of difficulties with which they face us. It must be determined in the particular case.

This emphasis on difficulty over ease of understanding, both with concern to others and oneself, may however also suggest that morality is more unitary than complex. For could not ethical reflection on this view be said to reside in the acknowledgement that we all face the same kind of difficulties? Stylist Ayishat Akanbi seems to make precisely this suggestion in a viral Youtube video called “The problem of woke-ness.”<sup>47</sup> Criticizing what she thinks is an overemphasis on difference among people working for social justice, she says,

I think if people were honest about their feelings as opposed to their political opinions, we would see that we have more in common than we do apart. Once that is achieved, then we can focus on our common oppressions. Because although we are all different: we are black women, we are white men, we are gay people, we are lesbians, we are trans; underneath the anger, depression, stress, race conversations & gender issues we feel a great big void.<sup>48</sup>

Akanbi here appeals to something we have in common, a struggle that is the same for all of us, regardless of the superficial differences that surface in identity political debates. Gesturing at the need to recognize our common oppressions, she does not simply speak for sameness and similarity, but points to a commonality rooted in experiences of loneliness, in the longing for belonging.

I'm just asking for us to be more honest with ourselves, to think about why these issues are happening, and to not be so reactionary. To be responsive and to be critical.

Maybe in wokeness 2.0: which is the second stage of the anger, in this new stage the focus is a lot more inward. Once you understand yourself it's very easy to understand everyone else, so easy, because we're actually not that different. We're actually painfully quite ordinary.

How our ordinariness and our traumas and our pain manifest is very different but the root cause as to why we act in the ways that we act often is insecurity, you want belonging, we want acceptance. Fundamental things to a human. If we are more understanding of at least ourselves, it's so hard to judge other people.<sup>49</sup>

Akanbi's speech is of course not a clearly thought out philosophical position. It is, however, a call for honesty, in much the same way that Murdoch suggests we need to lay our cards on the table. Therefore, we may need to consider how we respond to such calls for honesty. What do we take the honesty Akanbi calls for to involve? What do we need to be honest about? Is it, say, our feelings, our underlying similarity, the “root cause” of our talk about “difference”? Does our being honest reside in our speaking the truth about

<sup>47</sup> Akanbi, “The Problem.”

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

our difference or similarity (i.e. that fundamentally we have more in common than otherwise)? Or is it a matter of realizing that there is no truth that can be told? In other words, that we can only attempt to speak *truthfully* to these issues? Here, we are sympathetic to the latter suggestion, as well as the suggestion that the honesty called for would need to acknowledge that our deep struggles with each other are moral to begin with. They are in that way not intellectual questions about whether sameness and difference should be assigned the fundamental role in our moral thought. On this view, it is important for the sense of Akanbi's words that we read them not as a factual claim, "Essentially we're all the same," but as a *moral call* not to hide our real concerns from each other ("Be open about your vulnerability. You are not alone").

Nevertheless, we also wonder whether Akanbi herself manages to speak lucidly about our vulnerability? Is there not a risk that she also succumbs to positing identification with the other as an unassailable truth, treating the other as her mirror-image? A certain form of self-reflection is clearly at stake in all understanding. If understanding of another is turned into the mere understanding of oneself, however, self-knowledge risks becoming a new metaphysical foundation for understanding. "Once you understand yourself it's very easy to understand everyone else, so easy, because we're actually not that different. We're actually painfully quite ordinary."<sup>50</sup>

Akanbi speaks about the understanding she offers of ourselves as "quite ordinary." This reference to the ordinary echoes Murdoch's proposal, similar to Wittgenstein's, that attending to ordinary speech may reveal different pictures of ourselves and of morality. Nevertheless, if we follow their lead and survey our ordinary ways of speaking, these ways of speaking offer no help in determining *what* picture of ourselves and others we should put at the foreground of our moral reflection. In one case I say "We're actually painfully quite ordinary" or "I'm not that much different from you." In another it may be just as meaningful for me to say "You're your own person. There is no one like you." "You are all very special." All these sentences have their use in appropriate contexts. To understand their meaning, it is therefore necessary to look to these contexts to see not what makes them true or false, but rather what sense they have in these contexts in life.

This consideration of context may show the sentences to be unlike philosophers' metaphysical statements as to what human beings fundamentally are, or what their essential characteristics should be. Rather they alert us to the different emotional attitudes taken to others that are central to moral discourse. Despair, regret, joy, interest, relief, curiosity, may all move us to speak in these ways. They may also themselves be seen as attempts to move the other to respond differently to their situation. My words, uttered with feeling, or aimed at provoking feeling, may serve to encourage, admonish, exhort, support, sustain you. I may use them to brighten up your mood, or build up your sense of self. When some of these ways of engaging with others become more prominent in our encounters with others, they begin to reveal, as Murdoch says, "deeply moral attitudes to life,"<sup>51</sup> or "configurations of thought,"<sup>52</sup> that we may also wish others to incorporate in their life. When such attitudes take form in a person's speech, we start hearing not only the words uttered, but a specific kind of voice, or a style of voice. It may be a voice that emphasizes either the role of difference or similarity, or of complexity or unity in moral life.

Consider here Murdoch's remark on a "contrast of styles" in the work of Buber and Kant. In "everyday terms" she illustrates them by presenting a picture of morality embodied in the life of two different men.

One man does good by stealth, attends carefully to the situation of others, sees their needs, helps them without close involvement, even anonymously, admonishes indirectly, by implication and example, shuns close encounter. Only in rare situations would it be a duty, or indeed possible, to achieve complete mutual understanding. Another man prefers to draw people close to him, to have confessions, frank meetings, warmth and friendship, to give support by voice and presence.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Akanbi, "The Problem."

<sup>51</sup> Murdoch, "Vision," 98.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>53</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 470.

When reading this, it may first appear that Murdoch's emphasis on a loving attention to an individual would favour a view of morality that seeks to draw people close, and that expresses, as in the case of the second man, a personal warmth. Any attempt to picture morality as simple and unitary may therefore seem problematic since it removes these personal aspects from morality. Taking Murdoch as propagating warmth, however, hides from view that for Murdoch,

No doubt the afflicted human race needs both of these philanthropists. There is an essential area of coldness in morality, as there is an essential area of warmth. Seen in a Kantian [gestured at in the first man] context, the I-Thou concept [i.e. Buber's emphasis on dialogue gestured at in the second man] can seem (by contrast) thrilling and dramatic, readily compromised by various self-regarding consolations. It holds out a promise of experience and ever-available company.<sup>54</sup>

Although the last sentence may seem to suggest a recommendation of Buber's dialogical view of moral relations, Murdoch's general point is that both these aspects of morality may need to be in place to do justice to the variety of possible pictures of moral life.<sup>55</sup> We may need to accommodate both coldness and warmth in our thinking of morality. This points to the important respects in which morality is not only focused on the personal, but reveals a view of the individual that may need to be both disinterested and impersonal.

Rather than raising the question as to whether we should think of morality as personal and impersonal, as "complex and various" or "simple and unitary," it may instead be more rewarding to consider the meaning of speaking in these ways in different contexts, how it may be related to identifying areas of coldness and warmth in our understanding of morality. Simply consider someone saying: "It's all so complex, we can never understand." This can be done to voice a form of skepticism or a nihilistic justification of ignorance. Or ponder the ways in which the mere thinking of understanding as a complex phenomenon (and thereby perhaps as an impossible endeavour) may appear impersonal and cold. Then think of, from the other end, the possibility of finding warmth in seeing morality as something that concerns us all, as being contained in a "simple" message, such as the Christian command to love your neighbour.<sup>56</sup>

Considering the multitude of possible combinations of these features of our moral lives offers no simple formula, no recipe for successful understanding. In some ways, they point to the need to let these aspects of our moral lives be, to accept the plurality of voices as a central feature of morality, not to let any one voice dominate or deafen the others. The difficulty of doing moral philosophy, which Murdoch seems to point to, therefore, is not just a common ethical difficulty in understanding. The philosophical difficulties involve acknowledging the *disagreements* that arise when different people, and different philosophers, hear certain words differently, and come to argue about how they should be heard.

Haidt's announcement that we now understand the human moral sense, in its triumphant confidence, strikes us (the authors) precisely as an announcement and not as a mere report or conclusion of his research. ("This is understanding. It is given to us naturally!") At times the certainty in his voice sounds overconfident and comical, considering the limitations both in the theoretical framework and empirical evidence he offers in support of the claim.<sup>57</sup> Derrida's declaration of suspension, in response to similar forms of overconfidence, on the other hand, has a tragic ring to it. ("Understanding cannot be achieved! It is always out of reach.") It is too easy to see how this position would bring unease to the confident scientist. Is it not, also, meant to make all of us uneasy? But why should this not also strike the scientists as an impossibility, as failing to make acceptable sense? As philosophers we feel the urge to escape this unease, but, according to Murdoch, it is precisely the unease in understanding what another thinker takes philosophy and morality to be that we need to consider if we are to take her seriously.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Ibid., 490–1.

<sup>56</sup> Clearly responding to this demand is often anything but simple, but this must not deter someone from thinking it can be simply stated.

<sup>57</sup> If we struggle to see what shared understanding can be found in speaking of a human moral sense, the mere suggestion that "This [how Haidt defines it] is what it is" will not bring any resolution to our struggle, only another differing view to try to fit into our mosaic.

## 4 “There is perhaps no peace”

It is easy to think that Murdoch is simply posing a question about the character of morality that we could solve by intellectual means. Is it complex or various? Is it simple and unitary? What we have wanted to suggest is rather that depending on context we may well say both. In some situations, it is relevant to draw on the complexity of both morality and understanding, seeing how a person’s use of language is related to personal history, cultural context, and specific details of the situation in which he or she says something, thus recognizing their individual differences. In other situations, it is important to consider how we speak to similar concerns (such as my responsibility for you). We may do this to point out what with K.E. Løgstrup could be spoken of as an ethical demand in relation to another,<sup>58</sup> or to speak to an experience we all share, at least to the extent that we would use the same words to describe it.

As a way out of the problem we have suggested that the philosophical difficulties in determining whether morality should be about sameness or difference, or simplicity and complexity can be resolved by realizing that posed in these ways, the questions remain concerns for the intellect. Taking Murdoch as merely recommending that we move from thinking of morality as simple and unitary to complex and various, or to suggest part of its complexity lies in philosophers thinking it may be both, is not doing justice to the ethical questions involved in doing moral philosophy. Firstly, because the emphasis on complexity may itself be an intellectual simplification and be taken as a reason to encounter the other with overly great ease. Secondly, because it may draw attention from other distinctions we are able to make, such as the ones between coldness and warmth, and the kinds of distinctions between what is unitary and complex that can be made within moral discourse.

A third reason for not taking Murdoch as simply recommending complexity over simplicity, however, is the sense in which we need to accept that there is perhaps *no peace* between different views of morality, entertained by us in our ordinary lives and as (moral) philosophers. This point about finding peace in philosophical reflection is reminiscent of some of Wittgenstein’s remarks. In these Wittgenstein presents peace as a desired end point for the philosophical investigation. Rather than seeking an absolute foundation to secure knowledge, such as determining whether understanding is to be had, or whether it is impossible, we are asked to envision “peace” as a possible endpoint of our philosophical endeavours. Finding peace is then connected with reaching clarity in surveying different uses of language, of gaining “an overview of the use of our words,” a “surveyable (perspicuous) representation.”<sup>59</sup> Succeeding in that task would bring us to a point where we are “no longer tormented by questions” of the type that bring philosophy itself into question.<sup>60</sup>

For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed complete clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should completely disappear.

The real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself in question.<sup>61</sup>

For Wittgenstein this appeared a commendable aim for the philosophical activity. Yet, Murdoch seems to submit that in moral philosophy we cannot accept peace as an aim. Surveying different philosophical pictures of morality, embedded in different philosophical views, and the moral attitudes to life and to others of which these are expressive, may bring clarity, but it does not necessarily bring peace. Where Wittgenstein in other places urges the reader to take his or her philosophizing back to “the rough ground,”<sup>62</sup> Murdoch points to the roughness of our terrain as moral philosophers. We do not just find a place where we,

<sup>58</sup> Løgstrup, *The Ethical*.

<sup>59</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical*, 122.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.



because of the friction, can walk. Rather, because of the friction we encounter, not *beneath* our feet, but *between* us, we do not know where we are to place our feet,<sup>63</sup> in which direction we are to continue going.

Her remarks show the tensions arising from the varying weights people can assign to different aspects of morality, and the necessary conflicting views as to what is of significance that arise when there is no general viewpoint from which to decide what should be of weight. Since my perception of what may be of value is liable to change over time, my knowledge of courage is different at 20 and at 40, there is no point from which to judge that I have reached a sufficient understanding of the questions.<sup>64</sup> Since morality, as a seeking for the good, and ways in which to become better, can be likened to a “journey of the soul,”<sup>65</sup> a “pilgrimage,”<sup>66</sup> which leads away from public language to an “ideal limit,”<sup>67</sup> it is inevitable that different understandings of morality should emerge. The understanding that could bring peace to us as moral philosophers then appears to be the realization that there is no peace, and indeed will never be peace, in our understanding of what is morally significant.

But does this realization bring us peace, and on what level? One attempt to come to peace with it can be seen in Murdoch's suggestion that to a certain extent moral questions operate differently on a public, political level, and in our private, personal lives.<sup>68</sup> The public, political life, she says, requires a form of axiomatic thinking in the form of general rules for how to live together. The deepened understanding of moral concepts, such as our understanding of the good, however, is essentially personal, and involves us in the process of perfecting ourselves as subjects. (This may happen through reflecting on questions such as “Is what I'm perceiving to be good really good?” Or “What does it mean to act courageously in this situation?” Or “What does it mean that my concept of love has changed over the years?”) By giving us a better sense of the demands of a public morality and a more personal ethics, Murdoch shows us how the recognition that there are fundamentally different pictures of morality at play in a society that need to be both deepened and explored, does not necessarily conflict with the realization that there is also a need for basic agreement. Where public morality gives access to generally agreed upon norms of right and wrong (enabling a community of “I's”), personal ethics enables a continually deepened understanding of the good (securing the “I's” relation to the Good).

This provisional peace, however, only seems to come at the expense of excluding the question of understanding from one's thinking of morality. For what it gives is an understanding of *the individual's relation to morality*, but not any deepening of the moral aspects of understanding *another human individual*. The other enters as another “I,” as part of the “we” making up my community. In this pictured community every “I” stands in relation to a common and a more personal good.<sup>69</sup> What we do not get is an understanding of the sense of a “we” awakened by the realization that *I* stand in relation to *you*. What first appeared to us as our moral philosophical problem, that is, how to deal with deep differences in moral vision in our understanding of others, remains, then, unresolved. We simply evaded the difficulty of acknowledging a “you” who sees something differently than “I,” by turning it into a different question: the question of how “I” and “we” understand “morality.”

<sup>63</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 325, where he uses the words “We can't find our feet with them” to portray the difficulty understanding someone who speaks another language, or who appears to us a complete enigma.

<sup>64</sup> Murdoch, “The Idea,” 322.

<sup>65</sup> See e.g. Murdoch, “The Sovereignty,” 377; and Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 23.

<sup>66</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 474.

<sup>67</sup> Murdoch, “The Idea,” 322.

<sup>68</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 351–7. See 355 for situations where the distinction between the political and private is more blurred.

<sup>69</sup> Murdoch's explicit discontentment with ordinary language philosophy as a means of finding an understanding of value concepts in many ways seem to stem from it not sufficiently accounting for the ways in which different notions of what is good cannot be expressed in a public language. Where the ethical question for a perfectionist philosopher, such as Cavell, does not seem to be significantly different when posed as a matter of reorienting myself to the community and orienting myself towards the good (reorienting myself towards community, away from skepticism to finding a renewed sense of my words in a language I share with others is what is shown to be good, although perhaps not stated as good), orienting myself towards the good is *the* ethical question for Murdoch, and it is an orientation away from community.

This again shows the inherent philosophical hazards in the issues we have been encircling. Philosophers are of course as prone to suffer from misunderstanding as much as anyone else, some more than others, as it is in life. Philosophy, however, also offers us the possibility to confront these problems of understanding by turning them into a (moral) philosophical problem. In so doing, we do not consider our personal difficulties directly, but only indirectly, perhaps in a philosophical disguise. Raising more general questions about how we are to understand a concept, such as “morality” or “understanding,” we act as if the personal problem of understanding another could be expected to go away once we manage to fit the “question of understanding (or morality)” into our philosophical framework. (“I may not understand you, but I do understand the kind of problem facing us. It is of this type.”) We are then again prone to ask, *what* it is we are to understand, rather than asking *who* it is we desire to understand, and what that demands of us.<sup>70</sup> And this, itself, we now see is a moral failure. It is a failure, not primarily of *understanding*, but of *standing in* the relation, and of *taking a stand* in the relation. It is a failed opportunity to actively refrain from imagining that there is a point outside the relation from which we can determine whether we did really understand each other.

Simply consider how in situations of grief or suffering, the sudden death of a loved one, the loss of a child, even if I try to relate understandingly to someone, I may be struck by the defectiveness of my attempts at understanding. Relating lovingly to you may in such cases reside in the recognition that both expressions of understanding, “I see,” “I understand,” “I feel you,” and expressions of not being able to understand, “I can’t reach you,” “I feel so helpless,” come to an end in the face of another. Reflection on the words “You are in the world” can help end our philosophical torment with skepticism, and bring us peace by showing us a way out of the problem and a way in which we can rest assured in our shared language and world. What torments *me* here, however, is precisely the insight that “You are in the world” and that none of my words can serve to reassure *you*, the world being what it is. What torments me is that you are in it thus and so – devastated, consumed by sorrow, broken, torn to pieces, unable to hold yourself – and that the world is so as to justify your way of being in it – unjust, cruel, absurd, void of meaning, offering no support, breaking underneath your feet. Here there is nothing wrong with our words to describe what is tormenting us. There is, however, everything wrong in thinking that either you or I could come out of our relation by finding the right description. And yet we try. I say, or think, “I can’t bear it.” “I can’t stand it.” Then, instead of holding you when you cannot hold yourself, supporting you when the world no longer supports you, I try to wiggle my way out of the hold of our relationship. I loosen my hold of you and say, in spirit, if not in exact words: “This too shall pass.” “The world does not end here.” “You should hold yourself better.” And to hold myself together (remember “I can’t bear it”), I lose hold of you. “It’s her world. It’s her problem.” (The shift in pronouns is essential.)

These failures of standing in relation, of bearing to be in relation to another, are all too common in our personal lives. They mostly appear in much less incriminating circumstances. It is, however, relevant to ask what role they may have in encounters between moral philosophers. What is it that we as philosophers do, when we no longer see it as possible to continue our conversations with another philosopher? How should we characterize the moment when we start to find a philosopher’s thinking to be just an aspect of her, her problem, or as failing to make a sensible suggestion, to make herself intelligible to us? What happens, as it were, when we stop trying to understand *her*?

## 5 An exile from the good

A central site for such disagreements, of turning one’s back on another, is found in response to philosophers who try to turn our attention to injustices, be they gendered, racialized, or environmental. These

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<sup>70</sup> This is not to suggest that we only need to acknowledge the distinction between *what* and *who* to reach understanding. After travelling to *who*, we may well come to see that *what you do* is integral to anything you can be said to be, to *who you are*. In order to see this, however, we first need to travel to *who*, to see how that changes how we think of the *what*.

philosophers may be turned away from due to being too political, too partisan to a cause, or for raising issues that do not belong to the philosophically acceptable table.<sup>71</sup> “We do not understand” that which immediately does not look like the philosophy that is familiar to us. Here, however, we want again to take Murdoch’s philosophy as offering an example of where our difficulties in following a philosopher may lie. We do this by considering how she attempts to do justice to our relation to the good, or even the Good, as a central feature of moral life and understanding.

Here we reach a point in Murdoch’s philosophy where she does not only point to the metaphysics given in a certain picture about what is possible and impossible to us morally. Her interest is not only in revealing how our own metaphysical pictures, our pre-conceptions and underlying commitments, bear witness to our own moral struggles with others in relation to them. Laying her cards on the table, she offers a picture she intends to be compelling. One does well to note the Platonic streak, or the full-blown Platonism in the picture of morality she champions. This leads her to consider not only the need to lovingly attend to the individual or the particular. We also need to attend to our relation to that which we perceive as good.

This is by far the most difficult, and inaccessible, part of Murdoch’s thinking.<sup>72</sup> We cannot do justice to Murdoch’s views here, nor do we make any claim as to her having any precise view in this matter. Some remarks must suffice to bring to view the considerations that figure in her thought. Firstly, that ethics, moral thought, and moral philosophical thought need to respond to the question of how we can become better. Secondly, that such quests to become better cannot be rid of metaphysics. Thirdly, that myth and metaphor may be central elements to becoming clear about these questions.<sup>73</sup> These together suggest that the currency we are dealing with in the understanding involved here is not words, much less arguments, but images.

Here we can stop to consider how this kind of imagery has already surfaced in our discussion so far. Saying that we cannot “find a position from outside language from which to speak,” that “the other is outside understanding,” that “understanding is within reach,” or that “it breaks down when we lose hold of each other” or “our worlds fall apart” all call forth suggestive images given by means of language. They are not snapshots of reality. The bodily imagery they lean on, such as “taking hold,” “losing touch,” or “finding one’s feet,” however, speak to aspects of our bodily existence that are easily recognized in our concrete lives. We all know what it is to hold on to something, to lose our feet, to stumble or fall in the physical world. In these imaginative sayings, this everyday understanding of how we move in space is transposed to display how we move in relation not to the world, but to each other.<sup>74</sup>

Similar imagery arises in the way in which Akanbi speaks of our sharing experiences of a “great big void.” Here our longing for belonging is precisely conceived as a longing to overcome difference and disagreement, to overcome the forms of anger, pain, and insecurity that prevent us from “reaching out to others” and form a connection with them. Akanbi seems to suggest that this longing for belonging in part is a longing for acceptance. We suggest this cannot be the whole story. Certainly, we often feel at home when we feel accepted, and the feeling of being at home is so often a feeling of finding one’s feet.<sup>75</sup> Striving towards a shared understanding of what is common to us, however, it may be necessary to leave the comforts of our private homes. Perhaps we may then find a different kind of home in our sometimes

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<sup>71</sup> Cf. Diamond, “The Difficulty;” and Gaita, *Common*, who in the context of the earlier quote discusses a case of racism, Scheman, “Openness,” 94, on how, in the context of gendered injustices, “I don’t understand” can be used by the privileged to reveal a failure that is held “not against those who do not understand but against those who are not understood.”

<sup>72</sup> Among the Wittgenstein-inspired philosophers working with Murdoch, few pick up this thread. Most importantly, those who in other ways have taken much inspiration from Murdoch (see Diamond, “Murdoch”) stop following her here. Gaita, *Common*, who does address the relation to the Good, also does not incorporate the more mystical aspects of her thought here, speaking of “magnetism” or the “purification of energy,” Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 14.

<sup>73</sup> See Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 10–7, but this is a leading theme in the whole work.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Gadamer, *Truth*, 368, who in relation to Heidegger suggests that “understanding is not just one of the various possible behaviors of the subject.” It denotes “the basic being-in-motion of *Dasein* that constitutes its finitude and historicity, and hence embraces the whole experience of its experience of the world.”

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical*, 116, where he suggests that reflection on the meaning of a word involves finding the context where it is “at home.”

unsteady relations with others? And perhaps the Good is a helpful image to guide us through the moral importance of considering these relations?

Now, the standard picture of the Good associated with Plato is most often connected with vision and contemplation. Since looking, seeing, and thinking are often associated with sight, and more generally the head, many have suggested that moral insight to Plato is a largely intellectual affair.<sup>76</sup> Here, we will rather follow Murdoch in suggesting that “Platonic morality is not coldly intellectual, it involves the whole man and attaches value to the most ‘concrete’ of everyday preoccupations and acts.”<sup>77</sup> The sense in which this morality involves our whole being is a reminder that the relation we are to take to the Good is not one of cool contemplation. It is one of love.<sup>78</sup> It is love that moves us, and it is the Good that sets our love in motion. The picture of movement, of a being-in-motion, is further amplified in Plato’s suggestion that turning towards the Good involves a turning of the whole body.<sup>79</sup>

[...] ‘[O]ur present argument indicates,’ said I, ‘that the true analogy for this indwelling power in the soul and the instrument whereby each of us apprehends is that of an eye that could not be converted to the light from the darkness except by turning the whole body. Even so this organ of knowledge must be turned around from the world of becoming together with the entire soul, like the sceneshifting periaet in the theatre, until the soul is able to endure the contemplation of essence and the brightest region of being. And this, we say, is the good, do we not?’<sup>80</sup>

This imagery of turning ourselves towards the “brightest region of being,” which Plato identifies with the Good, appears in relation to his myth of the cave. This myth also speaks to ways in which our present sense of reality (what appears to us as good) can be pictured as an exile from the good, from the sun that would show our being in its true light. The picture of a conversion from darkness to light thus speaks to the sense in which in seeking understanding, we seek to *see* things clearly. The suggestion that this conversion from darkness to light can only happen through a “turning of the whole body,” however, adds another dimension. It makes clear that our seeking clarity does not merely depend on the use of sight. To picture this need for “turning of the whole body,” think of the turn towards light or sound that is not in our direct field of vision. Often we start from the eyes, the head, trying to see what is beside us, behind us. We cannot, however, complete the turn if we only turn our eyes, or head. It is physically impossible. Our turn needs to stretch past the chest, the back, the legs. It finally requires us to move our feet.

This requirement to move our feet throws new light on the difficulties of finding our feet in dialogue with other moral philosophers. It illuminates why imagery of movement, of “turning towards,” or “turning away from” are prevalent in describing failures of understanding. Finding our feet in moral philosophical encounters is here not primarily a matter of intellectually grounding our arguments, of finding common ground in what everyone can see. The desire to reach understanding in a way that provides the certainty of knowledge often falters at the attempt to reach such certainty in relation to others and what is good. It then easily turns into skepticism or a more general suspicion and distrust of others. This skepticism (solipsism) appears to embody yet another exile from the Good.<sup>81</sup> It is an exile from a good that we have been in contact with, paradigmatically in experiences of love. Yet, we fail to recognize this good in our relationships, in their present shape and form. Partly this may happen because we deny these embodied experiences of love, an attention to the particular, as a possible, and sometimes necessary, source of understanding. (An opening of the heart instead of a grasping of the mind.) Partly it may happen because we do not recognize

<sup>76</sup> See Nussbaum, *Fragility*, for an influential reading of Plato that suggests philosophy is an activity that seeks to transcend human embodied existence. See Barabas, “Transcending,” for a helpful criticism of Nussbaum’s idea of transcendence and a different reading of Plato’s ethical vision of the Good. See Cordner, “Vision,” 211f, for a critique of Murdoch seemingly privileging vision among the senses.

<sup>77</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 14.

<sup>78</sup> See Kronqvist, “A Personal.”

<sup>79</sup> We thank Göran Torrkulla for alerting us to this interpretation of Plato’s *Republic*.

<sup>80</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 135, 518c–d.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Cavell, *Cities*, 5: “Wittgenstein’s disappointment with knowledge is not that it fails to be better than it is (for example, immune to skeptical doubt), but rather that it fails to make us better than we are, or provide us with peace.”

that we have fixed ourselves in an untenable position. It is untenable precisely because it involves the denial that we are speaking from a position. We speak as if there could be speech and meaning that were not anchored in a specific point in space and time. The exile from the Good we are experiencing here is self-inflicted. I can, in other words, only deny that I speak out of a position, as long as I do not shift position. As long as we are not prepared to move, therefore, there is no way out of this self-inflicted exile.

What we get in Plato's imagery then is a picture of vision and contemplation that does not focus in on sight, or manipulating objects in our heads. The picture of vision is rather one of "inner motion," where we are pulled towards the light, but also are drawn in other directions by other features of our body.<sup>82</sup> The Good requires us to shape ourselves around it as embodied beings. Our search for the Good can on these terms be conceived as a *being-in-motion*, engaging our whole being. Since our being, as we remarked in relation to Heidegger, is a being-together, it also provides a picture of moving together. This "movement together" can itself be seen as a good, as in the social and political movements Akanbi addresses. It can be depicted as a movement towards understanding, towards discovering our common ground in sharing a world. (Perhaps someone would say that "being-in-movement-together" is our common ground.) It is also, as Akanbi suggests, a movement away from those oppressions that hinder us from moving freely. But Plato's picture of turning the body (not just of the individual philosopher, but of the community locked in a cave) also signals that this movement is not just a liberation from oppression. It is a turn away from darkness and towards light, a movement towards the Good. Our movement together then always needs to be in relation to that which we can recognize as Good. It is a good that is beyond the fact of our moving together, which allows us to judge whether we are moving in the direction of each other but also in the direction and light of the Good.

This gives us two ways in which understanding can be pictured as a standing-in-relation. (Our own guiding picture.) Firstly, it is a picture of *my* standing in relation to a particular *you* (and *vice versa*). Secondly, it is a picture of *our* standing in relation to what is Good. What our reflections about movement show is that this *standing-in-relation* can never be a mere matter of "standing," if this is taken as "standing still." If I stand still there is always the possibility that you move away from me, and that the relation to you is thereby lost. I cannot, as it were, see what you see, if I am reluctant to follow you. And it is only by following you that I can judge whether what you see was worthwhile for me to see.<sup>83</sup> The mere fact that we are beings who, due to the capacity for movement, can move towards and away from each other, thus opens for the possibility that we, through our movements, can also lose sight of each other. In other words, we can move away from the relation between us. *Standing-in-relation* then, is just as much a matter of *staying-in-relation* to you, of keeping up with you and finding ways of moving together with you. Staying in relation to the Good involves constantly being open to the question whether we are moving in the right direction, as well as the question what it is that moves us.

## 6 In conclusion: Laying one's cards on the table

We may not find peace, but we can lay our cards on the table. Another image is finally introduced by Murdoch in the quote we have been discussing. What are the contexts called up by that image of us laying our cards on the table? We are at a joint table, face to face, but each one of us only sees their own cards. The only way of guessing whether one's opponents have a good hand is by looking at their faces, to see if a sudden blink of an eye, a revealing gesture, gives them away. If we know our opponents well, these small, unintentional movements may be more revealing than they think.

<sup>82</sup> This picture of the Good is very close to and inspired by Weil's picture of forces pulling us in different directions. Cf. Barabas, "Transcending," 219.

<sup>83</sup> See Elgabsi, "Is There," in relation to the *Phaedrus*.



What then happens if instead of playing this game, we lay our cards on the table? If the game we are playing is poker, we end the game, we see who had the best hand in relation to the others. If we only play with open cards, we change the game. Then we lose the game we were playing, but something else may be gained instead. What, then, are the moral philosophical gains to be made by changing the game as Murdoch suggested?

Summing up our main points, this is what we are told. It is possible to make the question of how well we understand others, or what is entailed in understanding someone well, redundant by reducing the question of what it means to understand by simplifying it, by turning it into a question of the best general explanation. But one can also make it redundant, by turning the question into something utterly complex. This, we have suggested, is part of the danger of intellectualizing the question of understanding. But the tendency to think of this failure as yet another failure of understanding, or of understanding “understanding,” can also be perceived as a moral failure, as another expression of our tendency to intellectualize failures of understanding. This is so, because thinking that something is a problem of understanding is sometimes the form taken by our moral failure of relating to the other as a “you.”

Why are we so drawn to considering the failure of understanding as an intellectual failure, a question of knowledge? Why do we so easily come to think in this way, to try to think from outside our relationship to another? What this intellectual move conceals, and what we may want to conceal, is that it is only within our relationship that questions about the character of this relationship arise, whether it is good or bad, whether it directs our attention towards or away from the other. We never, as it were, stand outside of the relation. Still, we nurture an illusion, a dream, about reaching full understanding, without entering into the relation.

This, we could say, is possible because we are able to think that we are thinking in the absence of others. It involves, at the same time however, a denial of the fact that standing in those relations form a prerequisite for understanding. It is these relations that show us where we stand, keep us in place, but they also make us vulnerable to various forms of moral critique. To come to acknowledge where we stand, then raises a question about our attitudes to others in our ways of understanding them. It introduces the risk that we are being unjust in this attitude, in our understanding. This itself makes us vulnerable.

The difficulty of laying one’s cards on the table when discussing moral philosophical questions is in that way connected to our desire at times to hide our cards, or to resist to recognize the kind of game we are playing. Sometimes it is a denial that there are cards to be revealed in the first place. Other times it is a matter of realizing that in a common search for the good, although it may be playful, we are not playing a game.

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