

RECONCEIVING MURDOCHIAN REALISM

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It can be tempting to read Iris Murdoch as subscribing to the same position as standard contemporary moral realists. Her language is often similar to theirs and they share some key commitments, most importantly the rejection of the fact-value dichotomy. However, it is a mistake to assume that her realism amounts to the same thing theirs does. In this paper I offer a sketch of her alternative conception of realism, which centres on the idea that truth and reality are fundamentally ethical concepts. For Murdoch, I suggest, realism is a matter of doing justice to the objects one is confronted with—something that cannot be understood except in ethical terms.

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IT can be tempting to read Iris Murdoch as subscribing to something very similar to standard moral objectivists and realists.¹ For a start, she shares with them a common foe in non-cognitivism and, like them, she rejects the fact-value distinction. She also notes how natural it is to talk about *how things really stand* morally and describes her views in similar language to standard contemporary moral realists, emphasising reality, objectivity and truth.² She might thus be read as subscribing to the standard objectivist thesis that moral properties are ‘out there in the world’, or the claim that there are attitude-independent moral facts, entities or properties, and various philosophers have seemingly interpreted her in this way.³ Indeed, the very title of her late work, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Mor-*

1. For a small selection of such objectivists or realists, see Sturgeon (1984), Railton (1986), Shafer-Landau (2003), Kramer (2009) and Enoch (2011). Realism is a broad school, and I will not discuss the realism of figures like McDowell (1985; 1998) or Wiggins (1987) here.

2. Some non-realists also emphasise these, but realists typically deny that they make space for truth or reality as *they* understand them. See, for example, Blackburn (1993).

3. For possible readings of Murdoch along this line, see Widdows (2016), Clarke (2012), Driver (2012: 298) and Jordan (2014). However, they may have had other less dominant forms of realism

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als (1992/2012, hereafter MGM), is suggestive of an approach congenial to such current-day metaethicists: first determine what kinds of entity (property or fact) there can be in the world (metaphysics), and then work out how morality can be fitted within this system (morals).

However, this tempting reading of Murdoch is complicated both by her resistance to a number of standard realist claims and by various elements of her wider ethical thought.⁴ Regarding the former, Murdoch describes objective reality and truth in ways that are difficult to square with standard realism. Regarding the latter, there are three interrelated Murdochian theses that do not fit comfortably with standard realism: first, her insistence on the possibility of private moral concepts; second, her idea that not all moral reasons are universalisable; and third, her rejection of supervenience. Simply reading Murdoch as a realist in the standard sense intended in current metaethics thus ignores or distorts some important elements of her thinking.

This seeming difficulty in squaring Murdoch's avowed realism with her resistance to standard metaethical realism can be avoided by reconsidering her notions of objectivity and realism. Although she is a moral realist, her realism amounts to something other than standard realism. A closer look at her work, I will argue, reveals that her interest is primarily in realism and objectivity as a relation between the moral *observer* and the object, rather than as a feature attributed solely to the thing observed. I will suggest that for Murdoch, objectivity is a matter of standing in a certain *morally rich* relation to the thing observed, not simply a non-moral metaphysical status of the properties or facts thereby perceived.⁵ As such, moral concepts for Murdoch cannot be unmoored from reality; the moral agent aims to do justice to reality. Nonetheless, she leaves considerable scope for moral creativity and difference. Moreover, I will suggest that these non-standard conceptions of realism and objectivity are well placed to make sense of Murdoch's distinctive conception of the role of metaethics.⁶

in mind, such as the variant offered by figures such as McDowell and Wiggins. Lipscomb (2021) presents her (along with Phillipa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe and Mary Midgley) as a standard *naturalist* realist.

4. See Milligan (2012) and Bakhurst (2020) for worries about attempts to modernize and assimilate Murdoch within contemporary debates. Craig Taylor (2019) notes that Murdoch's discussion of the fact/value distinction is also driven by different concerns to the current debate.

5. There are parallels to this in Wright (2005).

6. The idea that there are alternatives to the current conception of objectivity may seem odd. But McDowell and Wiggins, for example, sketch a very different conception of objectivity to the standard one. Daston and Galison (2007) argue that even *scientific* objectivity is a historically specific and changeable concept. They describe the change in their own thinking about scientific objectivity: "Objectivity came to seem at once stranger—more specific, less obvious, more recently historical—and deeper, etched into the very act of scientific seeing, than we had ever suspected" (2007: 10).

I begin in §1 by outlining the standard conceptions of realism and objectivity and noting why it can be appealing to read Murdoch as subscribing to such views. In §2, I suggest that these views cannot be quite what Murdoch has in mind by ‘realism’ and ‘objectivity’. In §3, I outline Murdoch’s alternative conception of realism and objectivity. Finally, in §4 I discuss how this conception of objectivity fits within Murdoch’s broader metaethical outlook.

Before I begin, I want to note that throughout this paper I will be discussing Murdoch’s conception of both ‘realism’ and ‘objectivity’. Whilst they are often distinguished in current debates, Murdoch seems to use them interchangeably. I will therefore do the same and take myself to be offering an account of both Murdochian realism and objectivity.⁷

1. Standard Realism

Central to contemporary metaethics are the notions of moral *properties* and moral *facts*. Metaethics’s task is usually taken to be that of determining the nature and status of these facts and properties, as well as the nature of our judgements about them. Moral realists standardly suggest that moral judgements are genuinely cognitive, that they are about the moral facts, and that they are made true by moral facts or properties of some kind. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (2005) defines moral realism as follows:

Moral realists hold that there are moral facts, that it is in light of these facts that peoples’ moral judgments are true or false, and that the facts being what they are (and so the judgments being true, when they are) is not merely a reflection of our *thinking* the facts are one way or another. That is, moral facts are what they are even when we see them incorrectly or not at all. (Sayre-McCord 2005: 40)

Standard moral realists, on this definition, thus claim that there are facts about how things stand morally, and that these facts are made true in such a way that their truth is *independent* of humans’ beliefs, attitudes and so on. If there are essentially moral facts, then facts and values cannot be entirely separate kinds of thing. They thus reject the fact-value dichotomy, the idea that there is a gulf between facts and values. The final part of this definition, the idea that moral facts are made true by things which are independent of our having certain atti-

7. As will be seen, I will also draw on work published throughout her career, suggesting that there is a remarkable continuity between her early and late work regarding realism.

tudes, includes the central notion of objectivity. From here on I shall assume that this definition is largely representative of standard realism, and will focus exclusively on its most popular form, though other varieties (such as McDowell-style realism) may be closer to Murdochian realism.⁸

Importantly, moral facts are generally taken by standard realists to be a *subtype* of facts in general. That is, just as philosophical facts are a subtype of facts (only those pertaining to philosophy), and artistic facts are a subtype of facts (only those pertaining to art), moral facts are taken to be the subtype of facts pertaining to morality. This in turn shapes the general methodology that such realists often utilise: they tend to think that ordinary non-moral facts and properties can be understood through *non-moral* metaphysical analysis. They then typically argue that moral facts or properties exist by comparing the notion of a moral fact to these more obvious non-moral cases and suggesting that they have much in common.⁹

Since standard realists understand moral facts as a subtype of facts in general, they face questions about how moral facts relate to non-moral ones. Standard realists typically want to think that the moral facts are not independent of the non-moral ones: for example, they do not want to allow that it would be possible for something with all the non-moral features of a cold-blooded murder for financial benefit to be permissible. They thus accept *supervenience*, the idea that there can be no changes in moral facts without corresponding changes in non-moral facts.¹⁰

It can be appealing to read Murdoch in the light of standard realism. Murdoch begins the essay 'The Idea of Perfection' (1970/1999) by contrasting Moore's realism with the anti-realism (specifically, the non-cognitivism) of 'his successors' (IP 300–301). After sketching Moore's view in a way that emphasises its commitment to the reality of the good (it is a 'supersensible reality', an 'object of knowledge' and so on [IP 301]), she declares that "on almost every point I agree with Moore and not with his critics" (IP 301). This is naturally read as situating her within a metaethical debate and setting her alongside Moore, firmly within the realist camp.¹¹

8. Enoch (2011) describes this as 'robust' rather than 'minimal' realism (2011: 3), due to its inclusion of objectivity.

9. See, for example, Enoch (2011: 50–84), Brink (1989: 6–7); Shafer-Landau (2003). For a critique of this kind of argumentative move, see (among others) Cowie (2014).

10. See Roberts (2017) for a critical discussion of realists' acceptance of this as a truism. Roberts's criticism shares much of the spirit of Murdoch's thoughts here.

11. Note, however, that Murdoch does express some possible caution about the idea of moral facts, suggesting that Moore "held a curious metaphysic of 'moral facts'" (OGG 339). Coming from a standard realist, this claim might be surprising—moral facts are central to Sayre-McCord's very definition of realism.

Murdoch also makes many claims that seem to fit naturally within standard realism. In ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’ (1956/1999, hereafter VCM), for example, she writes:

On the alternative view which I have suggested fact and value merge in a quite innocuous way. There would, indeed, scarcely be an objection to saying that there were “*moral facts*” in the sense of moral interpretations of situations where the moral concept in question determines what the situation is, and if the concept is withdrawn we are not left with the same situation or the same facts. (VCM 95, emphasis mine)

This reference to ‘moral facts’ seems to fit well with standard realists’ way of speaking, as does her claim that there’s scarcely an objection to talking about such facts. Moreover, this quote points to a key Murdochian concern, namely the insistence that facts and values are thoroughly entangled—a rejection of the fact-value dichotomy. This idea is clearly also a core tenet of standard realism. Both standard realists and Murdoch thus insist that values are as much a part of reality as non-moral facts.¹²

Many other elements of her thought serve to strengthen this interpretation of her as aligning with standard realists. For instance, she repeatedly insists on the importance of knowledge and truth in ethics in works ranging from the early papers ‘The Sovereignty of Good’ (TSG), ‘On God and Good’ (OGG) and ‘The Sublime and the Good’ (S&G) to the late *Metaphysics as a Guide of Morals*:

The authority of morals is the authority of truth, that is of reality. (TSG 374)

[T]he realism [. . .] required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true [. . .] (OGG 353)

The connection between ethics and epistemology is something which we are intuitively grasping all the time in our non-philosophical lives. (MGM 186)

In making these claims, Murdoch affirms that our moral judgements are made *true* (or false) by reality. Moreover, she insists that these truths are something we

12. Though her mentioning such facts may seem to support the reading of her as subscribing to standard realism, it is notable that she only claims that there can “*scarcely* be an objection” to saying that there are moral facts (VCM 54, emphasis mine). Again, this may not be a wholehearted endorsement of their reality.

discover outside of ourselves, not facts we create by acts of will or in virtue of our possessing certain attitudes:

The ordinary person does not, unless corrupted by philosophy, believe that he creates values by his choices. He thinks that some things really are better than others and that he is capable of getting it wrong. (TSG 380)

Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. (S&G 215)

Again, Murdoch seems to be committing to something like objectivism here: she contends that moral reality is fixed by something outside of ourselves. In Sayre-McCord's terms, she is committing to something like the idea that "moral facts are what they are even when we see them incorrectly or not at all".¹³

This insistence that moral reality is something which we discover rather than create is an idea that Murdoch repeatedly returns to. Indeed, she sees the inability of 'structuralist' thought to make sense of this idea as a significant loss:¹⁴

The fundamental value which is lost, obscured, made not to be, by structuralist theory, is truth, language as truthful, where 'truthful' means faithful to, engaging intelligently and responsibly with, a reality which is beyond us. (MGM 223)

Structuralist (monist, idealist) thinking, by inflating coherence at the expense of correspondence, loses our ordinary everyday conception of truth. 'Correspondence' contains the awareness that we are continually confronting something other than ourselves. (MGM 275)

Murdoch here emphasises the thought that language can be truthful and refer to a reality which is *beyond* ourselves. Again, the terms in which she puts this rejection of structuralism seem highly amenable to standard realists.

These passages all make it initially attractive to read Murdoch as subscribing to a view akin to that held by standard realists. Most importantly, she rejects the idea that there is a dichotomy between fact and value, arguing that value is a part of reality and talking about 'moral facts'. Like standard realists, she empha-

13. Murdoch also frequently makes use of the idea of moral perception, which is an idea that has been of considerable interest to realists in recent years. Bergqvist and Cowan (2018) bring together many of these debates. For discussions of Murdochian moral perception, see Clifton (2013), Cordner (2016) and Panizza (2019).

14. 'Structuralism' is roughly defined by Murdoch as the school of thought epitomised by or stemming from Derrida. She notes that she includes "post-structuralism, deconstruction, modernism, post-modernism" within this category (MGM 185).

sises the importance of truth in ethics and emphasises the idea that humans are not free to simply create values: values are things to be discovered in the world, and we can be (sometimes deeply) wrong about them. It can therefore seem that Murdoch's views naturally align with standard realists', and that she should be read as an ally or forerunner to realists in current metaethical debates.

2. Complicating the Picture

Tempting though it initially is to categorise Murdoch alongside standard realists, however, there are an equal number of passages in her work that are ill-suited to or even inconsistent with standard realism or standard realists' general outlook. There are also a number of wider ideas to which Murdoch is committed that are in tension with the general framework standard realists work within. In this section I explore these and suggest that they give an initial reason to doubt that she is well-understood as a standard realist.

The notions of reality and objectivity, so frequently mentioned by Murdoch, can initially seem to strengthen the case for interpreting her as a standard realist. But turning to them once more, we find that Murdoch's conception of them is significantly different to standard realists'. First, note that she seems to allow for elements of progression and change in our notion of reality that seem ill suited to the standard conception of it. She writes:

The idea of 'objective reality', for instance, undergoes important modifications when it is to be understood, not in relation to 'the world described by science', but in relation to the progressing life of a person. (IP 320)

This passage indicates that what Murdoch intends by 'objective reality' is at odds with standard realist conceptions of it. Whilst standard realists would likely be willing to say that objective reality is not fully encapsulated by scientific description, the idea that it must instead be understood 'in relation to the progressing life of a person' seems to take us beyond realism as typically understood. Standard realists might accommodate the idea that things seen only from a human (or similar) standpoint are nonetheless real, but the notion of 'progression' seems to introduce a potential instability in our notion of 'reality' that is at odds with the core of standard realism.¹⁵ After all, how could moral reality or the 'moral facts' themselves alter with 'the progressing life of a person'? The heart of standard realist commitments, after all, is that the moral facts do not depend on us.¹⁶

15. For discussion of the former idea, see Pettit (1991) and McDowell (1985).

16. Again, I will explore this in greater detail in §4

Moreover, realists typically take moral facts to be one kind of facts among many: moral facts are typically regarded as one subtype of facts. But Murdoch suggests that *all* reality is moral—and thus that *all* facts are in some sense moral facts:

I can only choose within the world I can see, in the moral sense of ‘see’ which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort. There is also of course ‘distorted vision’, and the word ‘reality’ here inevitably appears as a normative word. When M is just and loving she sees D as she really is. (IP 329)

In the majority of cases, a survey of the facts will itself involve moral discrimination. Innumerable forms of evaluation haunt our simplest decisions. The defence of value is not an attack on ‘ordinary facts’. The concept of ‘fact’ is complex. The moral point is that ‘facts’ are set up as such by human (that is moral) agents. (MGM 35)

All just vision, even in the strictest problems of the intellect, and a fortiori when suffering or wickedness have to be perceived, is a moral matter. The same virtues, in the end the same virtue (love), are required throughout, and fantasy (self) can prevent us from seeing a blade of grass just as it can prevent us from seeing another person. (OGG 357)

The first passage here combines ideas that seem amenable to standard realists (such as moral vision) with the distinctly un-realist sounding claim that ‘reality’ itself is a normative word. Again, I will explore exactly what this means in the next section. Of course, realists might allow that reality is normative word in the sense that it is epistemically normative. But Murdoch’s suggestion, as implied by the context of the sentence, where she is talking specifically about *morality* (moral imagination, moral effort, M as just and loving), seems to be that reality is a somehow essentially *moral* notion. Similarly, Murdoch’s suggestion in the second passage seems to be that there can be no discernment of facts without moral discernment. As such, no facts will be purely ‘factual’ in the sense in which we might contrast them with ‘values’. There is, she suggests, no non-moral reality that is ‘given’ to us to which we might compare values. Instead, ‘ordinary facts’ and ordinary reality (blades of grass) are always already morally rich: “In many familiar ways various values pervade and colour what we take to be the reality of our world” (MGM 35).¹⁷

17. In fact, Murdoch seems to show some hesitation in the first passage of this paragraph, claiming only that ‘in the majority of cases’ this is true. But elsewhere her claim is more forcefully

Finally, this distinctive conception of reality points towards a wider difference between Murdoch's and standard realists' notions of *truth* itself. Truth is understood by Murdoch in a distinctive way:

A study of good literature, or of any good art, enlarges and refines our understanding of truth, our methods of verification. Truth is not a simple or easy concept. Critical terminology imputes falsehood to an artist by using terms such as fantastic, sentimental, self-indulgent, banal, grotesque, tendentious, unclarified, wilfully obscure and so on. (MGM 96)

'Truth' is not just a collection of facts. Truthfulness, the search for truth, for a closer connection between thought and reality, demands and effects an exercise of virtues and a purification of desires. (MGM 406)

These passages are somewhat opaque and may permit differing interpretations. But it is clear that on any plausible reading they will be difficult to square with standard realism, since they are rejecting the simple model of truth generally accepted by realists on which truth is something purely abstract and *unrelated* to truthfulness or the search for truth. On this picture something might be self-indulgent, banal, wilfully obscure, and so on whilst nonetheless being perfectly true. Implicit within these passages is Murdoch's contention that truth itself (like reality) is an ethical idea, something to be understood in terms of the virtues, not an uncomplicated 'factual' one to be understood in abstract metaphysical terms. Without this simple model of truth, realism would be an utterly different thing.

The above claims cause straightforward difficulties in reading Murdoch as a standard realist. Nonetheless, if her general ethical framework were sufficiently realist-seeming, we might still be justified in thinking that these are anomalies and seeking to read them in the light of standard realist commitments. However, her wider ethical views also seem resistant to combination with standard realism. I will briefly sketch three such views here and return to them later.

First, Murdoch insists on the possibility of moral concepts that are 'private'. That is, she suggests that the meaning of some genuine moral concepts depends on a particular individual, their historical context, and their conception of that context.¹⁸ Moreover, she suggests that it is possible for *fully virtuous* agents to have significantly different moral concepts. On the standard realist picture, it is

made: "Certainly morality must be seen as 'everywhere'" (MGM 301); "This is a picture of the *omnipresence* of morality and evaluation in human life" (MGM 39).

18. For more on Murdoch's notion of privacy, see Hopwood (2017), Wiseman (2020) and Mason (2022).

hard to see how there could be such differing moral concepts without some such concepts being inaccurate or simply incomplete.¹⁹

Secondly, and relatedly, she similarly suggests that moral *reasons* can be similarly private: she suggests that having a moral reason does not entail that anyone else similarly situated need have such a reason.²⁰ Moral reasons, on this picture, need not be universal, even given a full specification of the relevant circumstances. This picture of virtuous moral difference seems difficult to fit within the standard realist conception of ethics. If moral facts are made true by objective facts about the world, facts that are *independent* of humans' beliefs and attitudes, then it is hard to see how there could be scope for such difference: either there are facts corresponding to a moral belief, or there are not. If there are, then it is a kind of moral ignorance to ignore such facts. If not, then the belief is simply false. It is hard, in other words, to see how on the standard realist picture two similarly situated people could have different moral views or different moral reasons without one (or both) simply *missing out* some important facts about the world.²¹

Thirdly, as has been gestured at in the above, Murdoch rejects the idea that the moral supervenes on the non-moral. This is an idea that standard realists have overwhelmingly accepted. But Murdoch is insistent that there simply *is* no purely non-moral reality, so there could be nothing for the moral to supervene on.²² Instead, she suggests that there is only a single, morally rich reality.

All of the above make it at best awkward and at worst incoherent to interpret Murdoch as a standard realist. One way of drawing this out is to note that it is difficult to categorise her as either a naturalist or a non-naturalist—which are typically taken to be exhaustive of realists' options—because the division between these (our sense of what it might mean to be 'natural') begins to break down if *all* reality is regarded as ethically significant. More specifically, she does not think that moral properties are non-natural properties, where these are *contrasted* with 'natural' (wholly non-ethical) ones, since she holds that there are no non-ethical facts. But neither does she think that moral properties are 'natural' in any obvious sense, because she suggests that they are neither reducible to non-moral natural ones nor supervenient upon them.²³

19. It is worth noting that privacy is not in tension with all extant forms of realism other than Murdoch's. McDowell and Wiggins, for example, are in agreement with Murdoch here.

20. See Hopwood (2017) for a discussion of how this claim is distinguished from particularism.

21. These two elements of privacy also seem potentially in tension with the Platonic realism outlined by Setiya (2013) (as he acknowledges, 2013:18). Again, this feature of Murdochian realism is also consistent with McDowell and Wiggins's realism.

22. See Panizza (2019) and Antonaccio (2000) for further discussion of Murdoch's rejection of supervenience.

23. Of course, there is some trivial sense of supervenience in which Murdoch too accepts it (since I have suggested that for her there is nothing non-moral that *can* alter). But at this point its interest and explanatory power seem to have evaporated.

Of course, there may simply be some inconsistencies in Murdoch's thought. Indeed, if the conception of realism accepted by standard realists were the only one available, we might have no choice but to conclude this. However, in the next section I will go on to suggest that there is an alternative conception of moral realism and objectivity implicit in Murdoch's thinking that makes sense of these apparently inconsistent elements of her thinking.

3. Murdochian Moral Realism

The previous section suggested that the prospects of reading Murdoch as a standard realist are dim. How else, then, might we understand her 'realism'? In this section I sketch an alternative account of Murdoch's conceptions of realism and objectivity, suggesting that they are best read as primarily concerning the moral perceiver's relation to the thing perceived rather than concerning only the thing perceived. Moreover, I will suggest that though they have a close connection to truth, such truth must itself be understood in moral terms. Murdochian realism is thus a claim about the reality of the moral where reality is understood as that which is discerned by the virtuous perceiver.

The claim that something is 'objective' is typically thought of as a claim about the nature of an object and as indicating a certain kind of metaphysical standing that it has. No essential reference is made here to a moral perceiver. Indeed, the whole point of objectivity might be thought to be independence of such a perceiver. So, for example, if it's an objective fact that my pen ink is black, this expresses the thought that the blackness of the pen ink is in no way dependent on me—my claim is made true by certain facts about the (rest of the) world rather than about myself.²⁴

Murdoch's conception of objectivity, on the other hand, seems to be primarily about a relation between the moral perceiver and the thing perceived. More exactly, objectivity seems to be a matter of the observer relating to the thing observed in a particular morally rich way. Murdoch writes:

[T]he realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of self. (OGG 353)

24. Of course, independence from any particular perception need not entail complete independence from human capacities or perception. See McDowell (1985; 1998) and Wright (2005) for discussions of this idea. Jordan (2014) discusses this idea with reference to Murdoch, suggesting that she holds a response-dependent view of moral reality and an ideal-observer account of correctness (2014: 375).

[A]nything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue. (TSG 369)

Good art shows us how difficult it is to be objective by showing us how differently the world looks to an objective vision. (TSG 371)

In the first of these quotes, realism is seemingly glossed as an ability to see the world truthfully, or an ability to look in such a manner that the self does not distort one's vision. In the second and third quotes, objectivity and realism are described as something that alters our consciousness and a kind of vision. In all of these passages, realism or objectivity are talked of not as metaphysical features of objects, properties or facts, but as features of moral agents who are epistemically engaged with the world. Objectivity and realism thus seem to be ways of *looking*, or perhaps ways of engaging with the world in general. We can *look* or *think* objectively, Murdoch suggests, and this is opposed to looking or thinking in ways that are distorted by the ego.

On this picture, objectivity is primarily an ethical ideal for all human thought and vision. We should strive to see others and the world objectively or realistically, rather than in a way that is distorted by the falsifications of the anxious ego.²⁵ This ideal is the ideal of perfect vision. Such vision reveals things as they truly are—which gives a derivative notion of objectivity, the objectivity of the facts or realities that are thereby seen.

The idea that objectivity is a matter of a certain (objective) relation to an object, taken alone, is compatible with standard realism. A standard realist might agree with the idea that we can speak about realism and objectivity as features of moral perceivers, but suggest that objectivity and realism are ways of accessing what objectively exists, where 'what objectively exists' is understood independently of ethics. For example, standard realists might agree that one can be realistic or objective in one's vision but understand this in terms of accessing moral facts or moral properties which independently exist. But this ordering of explanations is ruled out by Murdoch's insistence that *reality* itself is a normative (moral) concept:

It is not simply that suppression of self is required before accurate vision can be obtained. The great artist sees his objects [. . .] in the light of justice and mercy. (OGG 354)

Philosophical difficulties may arise if we try to give any single organized background sense to the normative word 'reality'. (IP 332)

25. See Clarke (2011) and Holland (2012) for more on obstacles to truthful vision in Murdoch.

Morality is and ought to be connected with the whole of our being. [. . .] It is into ourselves that we must look: advice which may now be felt, in and out of philosophy, to be out of date. The proof that *every little thing matters* is to be found there. Life is made up of details. (MGM 233, emphasis mine)

What is objectively real, for Murdoch, cannot be understood apart from ethics, apart from the essentially human activity of seeking to understand the world which is subject to *moral* evaluation. This is not to suggest that reality is a solely moral concept: it is also linked to truth, to how the world is. But it is to suggest that a conception of reality must be essentially ethical. Murdoch's claim is not simply that the best way to *find out* what in fact objectively exists is to look at human attempts to understand the world. Rather, it is that there is no prior non-moral sense to be given to the idea of objective existence.²⁶ Again:

The world is not given to us 'on a plate', it is given to us as a creative task. It is impossible to banish morality from this picture. (MGM 106)

I would regard the (daily, hourly, minutely) attempted purification of consciousness as the central and fundamental 'arena' of morality, but the nature of the world must be thought of as essentially 'in' this place too. (MGM 301)

In these claims we see a reversal of the standard realist picture. Whereas realists typically start with claims about the kinds of thing that exist in reality (metaphysics), and then move on to ask about moral facts or properties (morals), Murdoch moves in the opposite direction. That is, she assumes that the question of what is real is a fundamentally moral question, and one that we can only answer by thinking about how we *ought* to look at the world (a moral question). Reality is seen as whatever we thus discern when our perception is morally acceptable.²⁷

Murdoch's insistence that reality is an ethical concept amounts to the idea that 'what is really here?' is an ethical question. On her account, there is no story about what exists that is independent of the question 'how ought we to conceive of this scenario?'. That is, Murdoch suggests that the question of what exists is ultimately and inescapably a question about what *matters* about the situation with which one is confronted. This is not to say that the answer to that ques-

26. See Mason and Dougherty (2022) for the related idea that the reality of the Good consists in its reality *as an ideal*, i.e., the fact it is a genuine ideal rather than a false one (2022: 12).

27. Broackes thus describes Murdoch as asserting that "we should allow the world to contain all that meets the gaze of a just and loving moral perceiver" (Broackes 2012: 47). This feature of Murdoch's thought might be compared to McDowell's 'no-priority view' of the relation between moral features and human sentiments (McDowell 1998: 160)

tion will, or need be, ethically comforting or positive (perhaps the important features of a scenario are bleak or tragic). But it is to say that any attempt to give an account of reality will imply that this description picks out what matters, and that ‘mattering’ is an ethical idea. Reality, on her account, is thus an essentially ethical concept.²⁸

Murdoch’s view as I have described it ends up being very similar to the view Murdoch ascribes to Plato. She writes:

Plato assumes the internal relation of value, truth, cognition. [. . .] Here the idea of truth plays a crucial role (as it does also in Kant) and reality emerges as the object of truthful vision. This is a picture of the omnipresence of morality and evaluation in human life. (MGM 39)

Here, Murdoch claims not only that truth is a somehow moral matter (‘internally related’ to value), but that reality is itself to be understood in terms of truthful vision. She also connects this with the ubiquity of morality. Given the inspiration Murdoch finds in Plato, it is unsurprising that her own view ends up converging with her interpretation of his work. In fact, Murdoch later echoes the first part of this quote in her own voice in numerous places, for example: “there appears to be an internal relation between truth and goodness and knowledge” (MGM 241).

What kind of relation, then, must the objective or realistic observer stand in to the thing observed? Murdoch suggests that no non-moral answer can be given here, no description that demarcates the objective stance in an ethically neutral way. This, of course, means that it will be difficult to even express Murdoch’s view in the terms typically used by realists (Murdoch is in a ‘different conversation’ to them). However, a description can be given in rich ethical terms. To be objective (or realistic) is best understood as *doing justice* to the thing one is confronted with, being *faithful* to the reality of it, being *truthful* about it, and so on.²⁹ All of these terms capture the idea that perception can be genuinely cognitive, whilst at the same time being a fundamentally ethical task—one in which

28. Diamond (1996; 2010) and Charles Taylor (1996) discuss Murdoch’s expansive conception of the domain of the moral in greater detail. Gomes (2022) explores this idea in relation to the idea of moral vision, suggesting that “for Murdoch [. . .] there is no distinctively moral vision. There is only vision: a just and loving gaze directed upon the reality of others” (Gomes 2022: 142). McDowell seemingly diverges from Murdoch on this point.

29. Note the things Murdoch suggests are lost in the structuralist picture: the idea of truth and truthfulness as “faithful to, engaging intelligently and responsibly with, a reality which is beyond us” (MGM 223). It is worth noting here that this conception of the relation between virtues and reality is in a sense circular: to see things as they really are one requires the virtues, and the virtues are in turn understood as revealing reality as it really is. However, it is not clear that this is a troubling kind of circularity. Murdoch writes: “A calm reflective realism about morals suggests a large complex picture which is outlined and underlined in a normative manner and cannot otherwise be adequately presented” (MGM 233).

‘seeing rightly’ is determined by the moral qualities of one’s perception. Seeing rightly, for Murdoch—seeing what’s really there—doesn’t only involve mechanical accuracy, but a notion of ethical truthfulness.³⁰

All of the ways of parsing objectivity mentioned above combine *moral ladenness* with a sense of *answerability* to the world. On the one hand, they emphasise Murdoch’s idea that we are not free to simply create value: we are beholden to reality, constrained by how things really stand. On the other hand, they make clear that this beholdenness is ethical, not merely mechanistic. Take the notion of doing justice to a situation. I can fail to do justice to a situation by missing out elements of it when describing it, or by failing to be sufficiently precise, but also by relating the elements in a misleading way or making trivial and irrelevant details salient at the expense of more important ones. To do justice to a situation is thus not necessarily to have an increasingly precise description of it. Rather, it is to give a description that captures what *matters* about the scenario. Doing justice to a situation will thus often be a matter of finding the right words or concepts to describe it. Murdoch’s famous example of M and D, where M moves from seeing D as ‘vulgar’ and ‘noisy’ to seeing her as ‘spontaneous’ and ‘youthful’, highlights the importance of this (IP 313). Objectivity thus involves a stance of openness to seeing things as they really are, where ‘what they really are’ is ethically laden.³¹

Murdoch provides some concrete descriptions of what this realistic or objective stance looks like in particular cases:

There is also of course ‘distorted vision’, and the word ‘reality’ here inevitably appears as a normative word. When M is *just and loving* she sees D as she really is. (IP 329, emphasis mine)

[A]t the level of serious common sense and of an ordinary non-philosophical reflection about the nature of morals it is perfectly obvious that goodness is connected with knowledge: not with impersonal quasi-scientific knowledge of the ordinary world, whatever that may be, but with a *refined and honest perception* of what is really the case, a *patient and just discernment and exploration* of what confronts one, which is the result not

30. Murdoch writes: “Beside the idea of truth as some sort of mechanical accuracy (science is not really like this anyhow) or obvious, and of course necessary, daily reportage (the cat is on the mat), we need a larger idea which can contain, turning toward the individual, ideas of ‘truthfulness’ and ‘wisdom’” (MGM 192).

31. Antonnacio (2000) also claims that Murdoch is not a standard realist, suggesting that she is a ‘reflexive realist’ who “affirms the truth-status of moral claims by adopting a starting point internal to consciousness and looking for an objective standard through the medium of consciousness itself” (2000: 121). Thus far, our accounts are consistent. However, Antonnacio nonetheless construes facts and values as distinct in Murdoch, which I hope I have cast doubt upon (2000: 121, 122).

simply of opening one's eyes but of a certainly perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline. (IP 330, emphasis mine)

Philosophical difficulties may arise if we try to give any single organized background sense to the normative word 'reality'. But this word may be used as a philosophical term provided its limitations are understood. What is real may be 'non-empirical' without being in the grand sense systematic. In particular situations 'reality' as that which is revealed to the *patient eye of love* is an idea perfectly comprehensible to the ordinary person. (IP 332)

In each of these passages, Murdoch identifies virtues which she regards as crucial to objectivity: love, justice, honesty and patience. These virtues do not only reveal an independently (non-morally) fixed prior reality. Instead, reality itself is understood as that which could be seen when such virtues are properly exercised. Virtues do not merely help us become better thinkers, enabling us to access a world the components of which could be fully specified by a complex enough computer. Rather, what is truly 'out there' is understood in terms of the virtuous person's perception.

Given such a view of reality, what would it mean for Murdoch to say that there is "a reality which is beyond us" (MGM 223)? How can we make sense of ideas like moral *discovery*? The standard realist reading of this might be something along the lines of: there are many facts that humans are unaware of, moral properties which further discoveries may make accessible to us. To say that reality extends beyond us on this reading is similar to saying that 'we might discover a new subatomic particle'. For Murdoch, however, this claim is primarily about our ways of seeing. To say that reality extends beyond us is to say that through imaginative inquiry there is always the possibility of finding a better, more morally adequate, way to conceptualise the world. It is to say that our current conception of reality is importantly limited, but not necessarily that we lack extra data. Rather, different concepts, or different ways of using them, might yet enable us to do greater *justice* to the world.³²

How can we square this conception of objectivity with Murdoch's commitment to the notion of moral truth? Truth is clearly a crucial notion for her, an ideal which we can and should be striving towards. Yet truth as typically understood is merely a property of propositions, something determined by given facts, or some other such abstract notion. Once again, truth is understood by Murdoch with reference to the virtuous human perceiver rather than a static set of facts. She writes:

32. Wright (2005) suggests a similar understanding of transcendence.

'Truth' is not just a collection of facts. Truthfulness, the search for truth, for a closer connection between thought and reality, demands and effects an exercise of virtues and a purification of desires. (MGM 406)

The fundamental value which is lost, obscured, made not to be, by structuralist theory, is truth, language as truthful, where 'truthful' means faithful to, engaging intelligently and responsibly with, a reality which is beyond us. (MGM 223)

Truth here is not understood as correspondence to some morally neutral set of facts, but as intrinsically connected with the notion of *truthfulness*. Truthfulness is standardly thought of as being a very much secondary notion, definitionally dependent on some prior conception of truth. Truth is understood as explanatorily basic, and truthfulness as a matter of aiming at truth or something similarly secondary. But Murdoch here suggests that the notion of truthfulness is central to the notion of truth itself, and truthfulness is clearly understood in morally rich (virtue) terms. Truth and truthfulness are thus equally important and basic notions for Murdoch, concepts that cannot be understood except in terms of one another. The truth, in other words, is what is seen when one does justice to reality.³³

For Murdoch, realism and objectivity are thus primarily understood with reference to a relation between moral perceivers and the things perceived. To be realistic or objective is to do justice to a situation that one is confronted with, where this involves an essentially ethical answerability to the world. There is no fixed reality prior to and independent of the morally laden possibility of looking; reality *is* what could be perceived by a virtuous agent. This is not to say that ethics is ungrounded in reality. Rather, it is to say that it is grounded in a reality that is always inescapably moral, and that cannot be properly understood apart from the possibility of a virtuous perceiver. Conceiving of objectivity and realism in this way requires a complete upheaval of our ordinary conception of them. Rather than being purely theoretical metaphysical theses describing certain facts, they instead become ethical ideals.³⁴ Realism and objectivity become things that come in degrees, things that we can move towards and are gradually able to realise. Objectivity is thus not simply a claim about the status of moral facts for Murdoch, something flatly true or false at all times; it is an ever-present thoroughly moral ideal to strive towards.

33. This is another respect in which Murdoch's realism seems to diverge from McDowell's, who does not seem to accept this notion of truth.

34. Some standard realists do maintain that realism is an ethical (rather than solely metaethical) doctrine, such as Enoch (2011) and Kramer (2009). However, they hold this in a very different sense; realism is not an ethical *ideal* for them, but an ethical claim about the structure of the world.

At this point it may be worth considering why this view counts as a form of realism. After all, as I outlined in Section 2, Murdoch rejects or reinterprets many of the claims that are central to standard realism. Nonetheless, she clearly accepts three important realist commitments: a rejection of the fact/value dichotomy, a concern with moral truth, and an insistence that moral reality is discovered rather than being dependent on humans' attitudes or beliefs. Murdoch's reasons for committing to these ideas are distinctive and importantly different from typical realists', but they nonetheless justify counting the view she is offering as a kind of realism.³⁵

4. Situating Moral Objectivity Within Murdoch's Wider Ethical Outlook

Objectivity and realism, then, are for Murdoch fundamentally ethical concepts. For Murdoch, claims about moral realism do not indicate a commitment to purely theoretical metaphysical facts or properties, but are instead ethical claims about what exists. I hope to have shown that this conception of realism makes better sense of Murdoch's writing than the standard conception of realism.³⁶ Having sketched Murdoch's notions of objectivity and realism, I want to return to the wider aspects of Murdoch's ethical outlook mentioned in Section 2. I will suggest that the conception of moral objectivity outlined above is well placed to make sense of these further commitments.

First, this interpretation of Murdochian realism makes good sense of her commitment to the possibility of moral difference. Murdoch is committed to the idea that there can be private moral concepts (genuine moral concepts whose

35. Contemporary metaethicists may also wonder how Murdoch's view differs from quasi-realism. This is of course a difficult question, since quasi-realism is itself a very broad school. I am reluctant to too closely define her views in relation to and in the terms of contemporary metaethics, because they seem motivated by very different questions and concerns, and doing so can thus obscure what is interesting and appealing about Murdoch's picture. However, there are three key points of difference I wish to gesture towards: first, Murdoch's claim that *all* knowledge and all reality is ethical is not typically accepted by quasi-realists. Second, her approach to *truth* is notably different from typical quasi-realists'. Quasi-realists typically say that moral claims can be true, but that truth is a somehow easy matter and one not understood in ethical terms. Murdoch's suggestion here is the opposite: truth is a very difficult and complex concept, and one that must be understood in irreducibly ethical terms. Finally, where quasi-realists typically distinguish ethics and metaethics, Murdoch thinks that the two are essentially intertwined.

36. This allows us to avoid reading Murdoch as simply *confused* when she switches between discussing realism and being realistic, whereas Broackes, for example, comments: "At this point Murdoch comes, finally, to the attribute of (*f*) 'reality' — or realism. Murdoch deals with something that is not, I think, quite what she had earlier advertised" (Broackes 2012: 66).

meaning is specific to a particular person), and also that there can be private moral reasons (not all moral reasons are universalisable):

We differ not only because we select different objects out of the same world but because we see different worlds. (VCM 82)

Reasons are not necessarily and *qua* reasons public. They may be reasons for a very few, and none the worse for that. (IP 326)

On the standard model of moral objectivity, it is difficult to see how these private concepts and private reasons could be consistent with objectivity. However, once objectivity is understood as a matter of doing justice to reality, it is easier to see how it could be consistent with multiple different moral concepts (which might in turn suggest different sets of moral reasons). Whilst some descriptions of a situation might fail to do justice to it, ignoring important and relevant features it has, there is often no single description that seems uniquely best. Different conceptions of the scenario, and different reasons, seem possible. Murdoch writes:

[M]orality, goodness, is a form of realism. The idea of a good man living in a private dream world seems unacceptable. Of course a good man may be infinitely eccentric, but he must know certain things about his surroundings, most obviously the existence of other people and their claims. (OGG 347)

Here, Murdoch suggests that morality is a matter of answerability to the world, but also that many different responses to it are possible: 'a good man may be infinitely eccentric'. Still, to say that moral difference is possible does not preclude the idea that some beliefs are false, some descriptions ethically and epistemically worse than others: a good man 'must know certain things about his surroundings'.

To fill out this idea it may help to turn to the case of art, as Murdoch herself continually recommends.³⁷ She insists that art is a central and fundamental way of cognizing reality and that art can express truth:

Truth is always a proper touchstone in art, and a training in art is a training in how to use the touchstone. [. . .] A study of good literature, or of

37. See Lloyd (1982) for further discussion of Murdoch's notion of truth in art and ethics. Gomes (2013) and Mac Cumhaill (2020) also discuss the role of art and attention in Murdoch's ethics.

any good art, enlarges and refines our understanding of truth, our methods of verification. Truth is not a simple or easy concept. Critical terminology imputes falsehood to an artist by using terms such as fantastic, sentimental, self-indulgent, banal, grotesque, tendentious, unclarified, wilfully obscure and so on. (MGM 96)

The conception of the truthfulness of artworks expressed in this passage is continuous with the truthfulness Murdoch thinks is expressed in ordinary language. Faced with some situation, there will be no single way that it is best depicted, even within a given art form. Still, we can nonetheless assess the truthfulness of artworks, and we do so not by determining whether they precisely correspond to aspects of the world, but by using the kind of thick criteria Murdoch mentions: is the work sentimental, self-indulgent or banal? She suggests that the truthfulness of ordinary statements is also a matter of their ethical qualities. These impose constraints on what we could correctly consider truthful, but they don't point to a single true description of events. There is always space, in art and in thought in general, for different imaginative renderings of a situation—and such renderings can be different but equally adequate to the reality of the thing perceived.

Something similar can be said of the reception or interpretation of works of art. Faced with a work of art, there may be multiple rich and interesting interpretations of it that are possible. But others will be shallow, uninteresting or conventional. There will thus be good reason to reject some interpretations of it, even if there is no single best interpretation. Moreover, it is clear that an interpretation can alter what we want to say the work of art *is*. Whether a work counts as a tragedy, for example, will be a question of what we want to say is *important* about the piece (is a good character's downfall central, or another character's comic word-play?). This parallel thus sheds light on both the idea that there can be space for moral difference despite morality being about reality, and on the idea that our interpretations are driven by ethical concerns ('what matters here?').

This interpretation of Murdoch's notion of objectivity also explains her rejection of supervenience. Supervenience is sometimes parsed as the idea that moral facts are grounded by non-moral (typically natural) ones. But Murdoch is insistent that there is no non-moral reality that is distinct from the moral one.³⁸ Instead, she suggests that there is only a single, morally rich reality to attend to:

In short, if moral concepts are regarded as deep moral configurations of the world, rather than as lines drawn round separable factual areas, then there will be no facts "behind them" for them to be erroneously defined in terms of. (VCM 95)

38. See Brugmans (2007) for discussion of the ubiquity of value in Murdoch

Murdoch here suggests that moral terms are not supervenient on non-moral ones and in a sense secondary to them. The Murdochian conception of objectivity makes sense of this: in that schema there is just a *single* morally rich reality. Seeing one's pot-plant involves moral activity just as seeing that someone needs help does, and both realities are such because they are visible to the person who does justice to reality.³⁹ As such, determining 'what is really there' is a fundamentally ethical question.

Moreover, Murdoch rejects even the thinner claim of supervenience that there can be no change in moral facts without changes in the non-moral ones. The possibilities of private concepts and private reasons allow for the possibility of there being purely moral differences between two situations, cases in which moral differences are not underpinned by any non-moral differences in the object. This is the sense in which reality is a 'creative task' rather than something wholly 'given' by the object itself.

The reading of Murdochian objectivity I have offered is thus able to make sense of Murdoch's otherwise perplexing ethical commitments. It explains how moral eccentricity might be possible among equally virtuous moral agents and why Murdoch insists that art is a helpful image when thinking about moral truth and truth in general. Moreover, it helps us to see why Murdoch rejects supervenience, a thesis that is usually attractive to realists. The conception of realism I have offered therefore coheres with her general ethical outlook and enables us to better understand what is at stake within it.

5. Conclusion

I began by explaining why it can be tempting to read Murdoch as a standard realist. Appealing though this can initially be, I hope to have offered a sketch of a very different conception of Murdochian moral realism that makes sense both of her insistence that the good person must be responsive to reality and of her equal insistence that there is no single purely theoretically fixed reality to respond to. In doing so, I hope to have shed some light on some of the wider claims Murdoch makes about truth, privacy and art.

I have suggested that Murdoch is well thought of as a realist despite not subscribing to realism as it is typically understood in contemporary metaethics. Of course, Murdoch does share some views and commitments with standard realists. However, they're held for very different reasons, and they're given as answers to very *different questions*. Murdoch's realism is another face of her commitment to the idea that the whole of reality is within the ethical domain, and

39. Though of course they may be unequally morally valuable

that virtues such as love and justice are the key to coming to perceive the world rightly. Realism thus understood is as much an answer to a normative ethical question as it is a metaethical matter. Murdoch's metaethics is not only bound up with lower-order ethical theorising, it is also an attempt to offer a way of understanding ourselves and our place in the world which is an answer to a practical ethical question about how to become better people.

Finally, from this sketch of Murdochian realism we can begin to see how love, usually a concept firmly excluded from the domain of metaethics, can come to play such a crucial role not only in Murdoch's ethical thought, but also in her metaethical thought.⁴⁰ Murdoch writes:

Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. (S&G 215)

One way to read this would be to regard love as simply a helpful epistemic tool, something that brings emotional or moral sensitivity to a situation. Whilst love is certainly epistemically desirable for Murdoch, this understates its role in her ethics. Rather than merely being a good tool to discover a fixed external reality, what is really 'out there' cannot be understood apart from some conception of the loving eye. Love is for Murdoch a central and crucially important virtue. As such, her claim that reality is "that which is revealed by the patient eye of love" (IP 332) is not only a claim about how we come to gain moral knowledge; it is also a specification of what really exists.

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40. Murdoch is not the only realist to think that love has a central connection to realism. Marshall's *Compassionate Moral Realism* (2018) also explores this idea. However, he accepts a much more conventional conception of realism than Murdoch.

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