Reading as a Resonant Relation between Cultural Creation and Human Universality

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Abstract:

In this article, I claim that moral life begins not in decision or judgment but in attention, the disciplined, loving gaze through which reality becomes visible as moral. Drawing on Iris Murdoch's philosophy of moral vision, I argue that seeing is an ethical act: a practice of perception purified from ego and illusion. By bringing Murdoch into dialogue with Stanley Cavell and Martha Nussbaum, I trace a constellation of responsiveness that unites vision, language, and emotion. Cavell reveals the moral drama of acknowledgment within the limits of ordinary language; Nussbaum uncovers the cognitive depth of emotion as a form of moral intelligence; Murdoch grounds both in a metaphysics of vision, where perception itself transforms the self. Against the abstraction of moral theory, I recover ethics as an art of seeing, a form of attention in which truth and love converge. Finally, I turn to film as the lived enactment of this moral attention: a medium that trains the eye to dwell, to discern, and to love without possession. In reframing moral perception as a discipline of vision, the article bridges epistemology and aesthetics, suggesting that to see rightly is the highest form of understanding and that art keeps this moral labor alive.

Keywords: moral vision, attention, acknowledgment, ethics and aesthetics, film philosophy

I. Introduction Seeing Others

> "The merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare, Donne, Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry."
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> (Woolf 1930, 34)

> "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him."
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> (Wittgenstein 1953, §223)

What does it mean to truly see another person, if such a thing is even possible? This deceptively simple question lies at the heart of both moral philosophy and lived human experience. In our everyday encounters, we often speak of "seeing someone for who they really are" or "looking past appearances." But what kind of vision is this? And what ethical stakes are carried in the way we see? One might ask whether our perception is merely the blind adherence to cultural rules, or whether we ourselves constitute the very point at which the lines of culture converge. Such questions remind

us that the act of seeing is never neutral: it is shaped by language, by tradition, and by the invisible structures of culture that both enable and constrain our vision. Yet it remains an open question whether understanding is entirely determined by these frameworks, or whether there exists a dimension of perception that transcends them a way of apprehending the world not wholly conditioned by the traces of our linguistic and cultural formation. It is precisely within this possibility of perception beyond cultural determination that its aesthetic and ethical dimensions come into view. For seeing is not merely an act of cognition or feeling, but an act of attention. A moral practice revealed in how we direct our gaze, in what we allow to appear, and in how we respond to the presence of the other. Perception thus becomes an ethical stance: in the manner of our seeing, we disclose the measure of our responsibility toward the world.

To address this neglected dimension, I turn to Iris Murdoch's concept of moral vision. According to my reading, Murdoch insists that moral life begins not in decision or deliberation, but in *how we see* the world and the people in it. In *The Sovereignty of Good*, she writes: "The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion. Goodness relates to the attempt to see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness." (Murdoch 1970, 91)This movement of attention, away from ego, fantasy, and self-centeredness, can be seen as central to moral life in Murdoch's philosophy. Her account of ethics suggests that the good is not chosen but perceived; not constructed but attended to.

Unlike Stanley Cavell, whose reflections often center on the conditions and limits of language, particularly the ways our ordinary speech both reveals and obscures our relation to others, and Martha Nussbaum, whose cognitive-affective model of emotion emphasizes how our feelings are shaped by evaluative judgments and moral reasoning, Iris Murdoch compels us to take seriously the idea that how we see others, visually, emotionally, morally, is the very foundation of ethical life. Where Cavell interrogates our failures of acknowledgment through language, and Nussbaum explores the moral intelligence embedded in our emotional life, Murdoch insists that ethics begins not in speaking or judging, but in the disciplined attention we pay to the reality of others. Crucially, for Murdoch, this vision is not a loose metaphor for moral concern, but a disciplined, attentive mode of perception: an exacting practice shaped by love, imagination, and the lifelong struggle against self-centeredness. Accordingly, ethics begins not with decision, but with attention.

Murdoch's account is thus particularly helpful in reframing ethical life as a question of vision; yet it also proves most fruitful when triangulated with Cavell and Nussbaum, whose respective emphases on acknowledgment and emotion illuminate complementary dimensions of this moral attention. In what follows, I will trace how Murdoch's ethics of vision contributes to a richer understanding of others as a moral and aesthetic achievement. I will then bring her into dialogue with Cavell and Nussbaum, before turning to the role of art, especially film, as a space where this form of vision can be enacted. My aim is to show that Murdoch does not simply offer us another theory of ethics, but a moral practice rooted in seeing, one that challenges us to become more attentive, more imaginative, and ultimately more loving in our orientation toward others.

II. Murdoch on Moral Vision and the Good

Murdoch's moral vision cannot be confined to a theory of virtue or psychological disposition; it is, more radically, a metaphysical reorientation. Her insistence that "to be moral is to submit to the authority of reality" signals a profound challenge to the post-Kantian moral landscape. Against both existentialist voluntarism and emotivist subjectivism, she posits that moral truth is not constructed

but *perceived* that reality itself, when seen rightly, exerts a moral demand upon us. Seeing, for Murdoch, is not a metaphor for knowing but the very mode of moral being.

To understand this, we must take seriously her claim that attention is a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. Attention thus names an epistemic practice and an ethical posture simultaneously: a sustained discipline through which perception becomes truthful. Yet this truth is not static. Murdoch's moral realism is dynamic. It unfolds as a lifelong struggle against the falsifying powers of ego, fantasy, and self-assertion. Vision must be *purified* before it can apprehend what is truly there. Such purification does not occur in the solitude of the intellect but in the daily exercise of love. A love that is neither sentimental nor possessive, but disciplined, patient, and exacting. In this way, unselfing becomes not a negation of the self but a *transformation* of its structure. As she writes in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, „Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real "(Murdoch 1997, 215).

The self does not vanish; it becomes transparent to what transcends it. Murdoch's unselfed subject is not empty but receptive, not erased but reoriented. The moral life, then, is not a series of decisions but an ongoing reconfiguration of attention: the slow turning of the gaze from self-absorption toward the luminous fact of otherness. To see justly is already to act justly, for vision, when purified, becomes a mode of responsiveness.

This ontological depth is illuminated by her reimagining of the Good. For Murdoch, the Good is neither a moral object nor an abstract principle but the horizon of intelligibility itself. The unseen source that renders both reality and value visible. Echoing Plato, she describes the Good as "the magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves." (Murdoch 1970, 100). Yet unlike Platonic contemplation that ascends toward the ideal, Murdoch's movement is one of *descent* into the concrete, the ordinary, the particular. The Good is not an escape from the world but the ground that allows the world to appear as meaningful. To see the Good is to see the world truthfully.

Herein lies the aesthetic dimension of her ethics. For Murdoch, perception and imagination are not opposed but mutually sustaining. The imagination, disciplined by love, becomes the faculty through which we discern the moral texture of reality. Good art, she writes," reveals what we are usually too selfish and too timid to recognize, the minute and absolutely random detail of the world, and reveals it together with a sense of unity and form" (Murdoch 1970, 84). In attending to the, art trains us to see without possession, to dwell with form and difference without reducing them to the measure of the self. Art thus performs the same moral work as attention: it teaches us how to see. As she observes, "Freedom is not strictly the exercise of the will, but rather the experience of accurate vision which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action." (Murdoch 1970, 65).

Murdoch's philosophy therefore dissolves the boundary between ethics and aesthetics. Both are practices of vision grounded in a metaphysics of the Good. To be moral is to learn how to see; to see rightly is already to love. This identification of vision, love, and moral truth constitutes her most radical contribution a claim that perception, when purified by love, becomes revelation. Seen from this vantage, Murdoch's moral realism stands as a counterpoint to the linguistic and emotional approaches that dominate much of twentieth-century moral philosophy. Where others locate morality in the structures of language or in the architecture of emotion, Murdoch anchors it in the ontology of attention. Her ethics is not founded on rules, nor on sentiment, but on the transformation of vision itself. It is precisely at this point, where vision becomes the locus of moral life, that Murdoch's thought invites dialogue with her philosophical contemporaries. Stanley Cavell, in his meditations on skepticism and acknowledgment, likewise wrestles with the moral significance

of seeing and hearing others, though his path runs through the terrain of language. If Murdoch teaches us to see, Cavell teaches us to listen; and between these two gestures, vision and voice, the space of moral relation begins to take shape.

III. A Triangulation

If Cavell's ethics of acknowledgment unfolds within the medium of language, Murdoch's thought invites us to extend that responsiveness beyond speech to the ways reality itself makes a claim upon us. Her concern is not only how we respond to others, but how we allow the world to appear truthfully in perception and imagination. Where Cavell lingers at the threshold of the sayable, Murdoch directs us to the field of vision and form: to what must be seen and imagined rightly before it can be spoken rightly. Both thinkers reveal the moral dimension of our relation to reality, yet Murdoch adds to Cavell's ethical responsiveness a metaphysical and aesthetic depth.

Still, Cavell would likely begrudge Murdoch's recourse to metaphysics, her appeal to the Good as a transcendent horizon of intelligibility. His philosophy remains wary of any return to what he might regard as "moral theory," that is, to systematic or vertical accounts of value that seem to stand above the ordinary. Cavell's perfectionism, grounded in the fragility of our everyday criteria, finds moral significance in the human struggle for mutual understanding, not in a metaphysical order of being. As he famously writes, "Acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge" (Cavell 1976, 257). The ethical task, then, is not to *know* the other as an object within a moral system, but to *recognize* and respond to the other within the limits of our shared language. From this perspective, Murdoch's invocation of the Good might appear to Cavell as an attempt to stabilize what should remain perpetually unsettled: our ordinary search for meaning and acknowledgment within the limits of expression. Where Murdoch seeks moral orientation in the reality of value, Cavell finds it in the drama of responsiveness itself—in the ongoing negotiation of what words, gestures, and lives can mean between us.

Yet this difference, far from a contradiction, discloses the complementarity of their projects. Murdoch's metaphysical realism gives substance to what Cavell leaves deliberately open; it offers a picture of the moral world in which responsiveness is not only linguistic but ontological, grounded in the structure of reality itself. Conversely, Cavell's resistance preserves the humility of the ordinary: he reminds us that moral vision, however elevated, must find its expression in acknowledgment, in the words and acts that constitute our shared life. In this sense, Cavell tempers Murdoch's vertical transcendence with his horizontal insistence on the everyday, while Murdoch deepens Cavell's ordinary language ethics with a vision of the Good that anchors our responsiveness to others in a reality that exceeds us.

In this light, their divergence becomes the site of a fruitful synthesis. Cavell teaches us that acknowledgment is the moral form of responsiveness within language; Murdoch shows that such responsiveness presupposes a purified way of seeing. If Cavell's moral conversation takes place in the space between voices, Murdoch's unfolds in the silent interval between self and world. Each thereby illuminates the other: acknowledgment as the ethical gesture, attention as its perceptual and metaphysical ground.

Turning to Martha Nussbaum, we encounter another influential account of moral experience one that, while distinct from Murdoch's metaphysics of vision, nonetheless shares her conviction that perception and value are internally intertwined. In *Upheavals of Thought*, Nussbaum contends that emotions are not irrational impulses but judgments of value: ways of discerning what matters

to us and why. Emotions, in her view, are cognitively rich and ethically significant; they register our attachments and expose our vulnerabilities. (Nussbaum 2001, 19-23).

If Cavell locates moral responsiveness in acknowledgment, and Murdoch in the purification of vision, Nussbaum finds it in the intelligibility of emotion in the affective movements through which the world discloses its significance. Her moral psychology thus extends the previous line of thought from responsiveness and perception into the realm of feeling. Like Cavell, she resists the abstraction of moral theory; like Murdoch, she insists that genuine understanding requires attention. Yet where Murdoch grounds this attention in metaphysical realism, Nussbaum articulates it as an embodied intelligence, rooted in the emotional life itself.

This orientation becomes especially vivid in *Love's Knowledge*, where Nussbaum explores the epistemic role of literature in shaping moral understanding. Literature, she argues, does not merely exemplify ethical concepts but constitutes a form of moral knowledge a mode of insight born from imaginative participation in the inner lives of others. Her reading of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* exemplifies this claim. In tracing the consciousness of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf's novel enacts how two people, long bound by love and frustration, continually "read each other's sacred inscriptions" (Nussbaum 1995, 731) through the sustained exercise of thought and imagination. The novel's aesthetic form reveals that moral understanding is not the grasp of principle but the cultivation of interpretive attention a patience of vision and feeling through which others come to matter.

In this respect, Nussbaum's account resonates with bell hooks's insistence that genuine love is not a consoling fantasy but a transformative practice. "To know love," hooks writes, "we have to invest time and commitment... dreaming that love will save us, solve all our problems, or provide a steady state of bliss or security only keeps us stuck in wishful fantasy, undermining the real power of love, which is to transform us" (hooks 2000, 114). Both Nussbaum and hooks thus converge on the insight that love whether mediated by literature or articulated through critical theory discloses its truth not in fleeting emotion but in the enduring discipline of attention capable of reshaping who we are.

At this juncture, Nussbaum's view both echoes and refracts Murdoch's. Each rejects the notion of ethical neutrality, affirming that perception, whether emotional or visual, is saturated with value. Yet Murdoch presses further: where Nussbaum elucidates the inner architecture of emotion, Murdoch insists on the moral primacy of what lies beyond it. For her, the task is not merely to interpret our feelings but to train them; not to trace the contours of the self's responsiveness, but to orient that responsiveness toward reality itself. If Nussbaum teaches us to read the heart, Murdoch teaches us to look outward to see, beyond the self's texture of emotion, the independent and inexhaustible presence of the world that commands our moral attention.

We might say that bringing Murdoch into dialogue with Cavell and Nussbaum radicalizes both without dissolving their differences. She extends Cavell's account of acknowledgment by giving it ontological weight anchoring responsiveness not merely in language but in the moral texture of reality itself. And she enriches Nussbaum's conception of emotional knowledge by placing aesthetic and imaginative attention at the heart of moral perception. Where Cavell listens and Nussbaum feels, Murdoch teaches us to see.

I take these orientations not as competing models but as complementary tensions within the moral imagination. Together, Cavell, Nussbaum, and Murdoch outline a triptych of responsiveness: Cavell attends to the grammar of acknowledgment, Nussbaum to the narrative of emotion, and

Murdoch to the spiritual discipline of vision. Viewed through this constellation, understanding is not a single faculty but a practice that unites responsiveness and perception. A sustained effort to see, interpret, and respond rightly to the world and to others. Murdoch's insistence on the Good as a transcendent moral horizon finally sharpens what is at stake in this synthesis. Against Cavell's caution toward metaphysical claims and Nussbaum's Aristotelian grounding of value in human flourishing, Murdoch reasserts a reality that exceeds us. The Good, for her, is neither an inner ideal nor a social convention but the inexhaustible measure that calls our attention outward and humbles the self. This is the radical core of her thought and its abiding relevance: that moral life begins where self-assertion yields to perception, where freedom is reimagined as the patience to see, and where love becomes the form of understanding itself.

IV. Film as Visual Practice

If, as Murdoch argues, morality begins in how we see, then aesthetic experience, especially in its most immersive and perceptually demanding forms, becomes not a luxury but a discipline: a visual practice. For Murdoch, art is never a diversion from the moral life but a central medium through which our capacity for attention is cultivated, tested, and refined. She writes: "[Arts] show us the peculiar sense in which the concept of virtue is tied on to the human condition. They show us the absolute pointlessness of virtue while exhibiting its supreme importance; the enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue" (Murdoch 1970, 84). In this way, Murdoch aligns aesthetic perception with moral perception: both demand that we attend to something beyond ourselves, to dwell with form, particularity, and meaning without instrumentalizing what we perceive.

In this light, film emerges as a privileged medium for moral vision. Although Murdoch wrote little about cinema, her emphasis on visual perception, imagination, and the moral significance of art opens a path for rethinking film as an ethical practice. Unlike static images or abstract argument, film unfolds in time. It offers moving images of moral life, not mere representations of ethical conflict, but immersive experiences that engage our sensory, emotional, and interpretive faculties simultaneously. Through image, sound, rhythm, and narrative, film draws us into the perceptual worlds of others. It asks of us what Murdoch calls attention: the capacity to linger, to notice, to respond without haste, to perceive gestures, silences, and the fragile patterns of care or harm that compose moral experience.

Crucially, this mode of engagement does not indulge the illusion of egocentric participation in the events depicted. Like painting and literature, though unlike theatre, film resists placing the viewer at the centre of the action. Its power lies instead in the multiplicity of perspectives it sustains. This layered perception bears directly upon Murdoch's idea of the just and loving gaze. While grounded in the act of seeing, the phrase gestures toward a more expansive, metaphysical vision, one attuned not only to appearances but to the moral reality that inheres within them.

Attention, Murdoch insists, is not a momentary act but a discipline, a practice of returning, failing, and beginning again. Film gives temporal shape to this discipline. It slows perception, holding us within moments we might otherwise overlook, revealing the ethical density of the ordinary. "Good art," she writes, "reveals what we are usually too selfish or too timid to recognize." (Murdoch 1970, 84). Through such revelation, film becomes a form of moral training: a schooling of perception that cultivates a mode of sustained, truthful attention to the irreducible reality of others.

Yet, Murdoch is wary of compassion that collapses into identification. *Unselfing* does not mean merging with the other but making space for their difference. The aim is not to become the other, but to perceive them as they are without distortion, appropriation, or haste. Film, by dwelling on faces, gestures, pauses, and ambivalences, teaches precisely this discipline of moral regard. It trains us to see difference without subsuming it, to remain responsive without possession.

Murdoch's conception of the Good as a transcendent moral horizon clarifies why this aesthetic experience matters. We do not turn to art for distraction or catharsis, but to see more clearly. The work of art, especially the moving image, becomes a site of spiritual exercise: a practice through which vision is purified. We learn, again, to perceive what is difficult to see the ambiguous, the vulnerable, the painfully real. In this process we approach what Murdoch calls "just and loving attention": not an innate gift, but an achieved moral vision.

In this sense, film exemplifies the intersection of ethics and aesthetics that runs through Murdoch's thought. It shows that moral life is not only a matter of will or feeling, but of form and perception of how we attend to what is before us. If philosophy begins, as Cavell reminds us, in acknowledgment, and if emotional understanding, as Nussbaum shows, discloses what we value, then film may be where these capacities meet in practice: in the training of the eye and imagination toward truth. Murdoch's moral realism thus reorients contemporary ethics by reminding us that the work of seeing rightly is never finished, and that art, at its best, keeps this task alive.

V. Conclusion

What, then, does it mean to truly see another person? If Murdoch is right, to see is not to possess or define, but to attend, to let the other appear in their irreducible reality. This act of vision is not given but achieved: it demands a discipline of attention that purifies perception from the distortions of ego and fantasy. To see justly is to acknowledge the moral weight of our vision to recognize that in the way we look, we already respond. Seeing thus becomes an ethical practice, not because it judges, but because it loves: it strives to perceive without appropriation, to dwell with difference without fear. The ethical stakes of this seeing lie precisely here. How we see others discloses who we are and what we take reality to be. A distorted gaze perpetuates illusion and moral blindness; a just and loving one reorients us toward truth. Murdoch's philosophy reminds us that the good is not a principle we impose upon the world, but a light by which the world becomes visible. It calls us to a mode of vision in which the self yields to what is before it.

And yet, if all seeing is shaped by language and culture, can such vision ever truly transcend its conditions? Cavell and Nussbaum help us see that this transcendence is not an escape from the human but a transformation within it. For Cavell, our words disclose the fragile space of acknowledgment; for Nussbaum, our emotions reveal what we value and fear. Murdoch's contribution is to show that both language and emotion are rooted in perception itself that attention is the ground on which acknowledgment and feeling unfold. The point is not to look beyond culture, but to see through it: to discern, within its forms, the moral reality that calls us to responsibility. In this sense, art, and especially film, becomes a living laboratory for this moral vision. It trains our sight to linger, to notice, to attend without haste. Through its rhythms of seeing and being seen, film teaches us that perception is never neutral, that to witness is already to take part in the moral fabric of the world. The question of whether we can truly see another person therefore remains open, but it is no longer abstract. We see truly not when we master or explain, but when we attend, when we let ourselves be changed by what we see.

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