

compos mentis

Murdoch's Vision: Original-M vs. Brain-of-M

Betty Barnett

Vanderbilt University

ABSTRACT

In her book, *The Sovereignty of Good*, Iris Murdoch argues that the moral philosophy of her day overemphasizes, to a fault, the role of choice in ethics. Instead, she says, vision—which is the moral perception of, or attention toward, things other than oneself—ought to be the region of focus in ethical inquiry. However, although the vision that Murdoch describes is of supreme importance ethically, it is not for the reasons that she claims. Rather than vision being an isolated object of ethical importance, as she sees it, its salience is completely dependent on the potential it holds to affect conscious beings through influencing action.

KEYWORDS

Murdoch, Moral Psychology, Ethics, Consciousness

In her book, *The Sovereignty of Good*, Iris Murdoch argues that the moral philosophy of her day overemphasizes, to a fault, the role of choice in ethics. Instead, she says, *vision*—which is the moral perception of, or *attention* toward, things other than oneself—ought to be the region of focus in ethical inquiry. However, although the vision that Murdoch describes is of supreme importance ethically, it is not for the reasons that she claims. Rather than vision being an isolated object of ethical importance, as she sees it, its salience is completely dependent on the potential it holds to affect conscious beings through influencing action.

Murdoch classifies those philosophers who tout an erroneously choice-exclusive view of ethics as *existentialist-behaviorist-utilitarians* (EBUs). In *The Sovereignty of Good*, she designates a single philosopher, Stuart Hampshire, to serve as the prime example of an EBU, drawing from his work in order to critique the EBUs' views on moral agency. According to her, EBUs like Hampshire are wrong in claiming that "'good' is a function of the will," and hence that ethics wholly revolves around choice (Murdoch 2013, 4). This mindset leads to a form of moral evaluation that "is and can only be concerned with public acts," entirely neglecting one's inner state, which Murdoch holds to be vital (Murdoch 2013, 9).

This failure to factor the internal life into ethical considerations, however, is intentional on the part of EBUs, and stems from another core tenet of theirs: the *genetic analysis* of mental concepts, which is the notion that "what identifies [] emotion[, for example,] is the presence not of a particular private object [in the mind], but of some typical outward behavior pattern" (Murdoch 2013, 13). This perspective, Murdoch explains, leads to an unrealistically narrow conception of the individual's inner life, in which all that exists there is an isolated will; likewise, it lends credence to the idea that, again, freedom pertains merely to choice. By ignoring the inner activity of vision—in which one, over time, develops a view of one's environment—EBUs therefore hold that moral meaning exists only when in union with action.

After articulating her empirical, philosophical, and moral objections to the EBU philosophy, then, Murdoch proceeds to present an analogy, seeking to illustrate why her view of human freedom is a superior one. In this famous thought experiment of hers, a mother, M, "feels hostility" toward her daughter-in-law, D, due to her perception that D is pert, rude, juvenile, and so on (Murdoch 2013, 16). Despite M's negative feelings toward D, however, M "behaves beautifully" toward

her, “not allowing her real opinion” to show through in any way (Murdoch 2013, 17). Eventually, D immigrates elsewhere, and M begins to question her long-held opinions concerning D. Wholly independent of any action or influence on the part of D, then, M changes her view of her daughter-in-law, now construing the many traits she used to abhor as endearing. All the while, however, M’s outward behavior has remained consistently positive, without even a trace of animosity directed toward D.

In relaying this tale, Murdoch attempts to show that M’s conceptual shift, despite not being a matter of observable behavior, is a morally meaningful activity, and that, accordingly, ethical value can sometimes be unearthed in vision alone. This interpretation is problematic, though. Consider, for example, a novel continuation of this same story: after perceiving D in a new light, M dies. Since D already left the continent some years before, M never got a chance to see D again, and so never expressed her inward transformation of opinion concerning D to anyone. Without ever having exhibited any observable behavior indicating her shift in perception, therefore, this change in M is not morally meaningful. If, however, M had communicated her newfound feelings to another individual, A, then I would agree that M’s shift was morally meaningful since her confession would have, at the very least, affected A, and, quite possibly, D, as well, assuming an open channel of communication between A and D. However, even in this instance, M’s relaying of her feelings would have constituted an empirically observable action, and hence would no longer count as strictly internal in nature.

To best understand why this is the case, then—why M’s completely silent change in vision, followed by her abrupt death, lacks ethical import—one must consider yet another take on the M&D example. In this dystopian version of the analogy, M’s brain, BoM, resides in a self-maintaining vat, which has been forever abandoned by scientists. BoM, harvested in the year 2150, retains the same consciousness it had when it was still inside of M’s skull, minus, of course, incoming sensory perception. With all of its memories still intact, then, it is free—for the rest of time—to form and re-form opinions concerning D. Given its utter disconnect from any other forms of consciousness, however, no moral meaning could possibly be assigned to BoM’s endless musings. This amoral status can be explained by the fact that BoM, being confined to its solitary vat, cannot ever again effect change in the world (assuming, of course, that any hope of technical progress—of BoM’s someday accessing a conduit of information—is in vain).

The lack of agency exemplified here is fully attributable to the one difference between BoM and original-M (OG-M): BoM lacks a body, an outlet for action, whereas OG-M does not. Even if BoM were to be rediscovered, and then carried around in its vat—a move that, were BoM to be aware of, would be against its unable-to-be-articulated wishes—perhaps even to D’s own apartment, BoM still would not be capable of effecting change. Its carrier, in this particular case, would be effecting change, prompting an emotional reaction from D upon seeing her mother-in-law’s voiceless brain, for instance, but this and any other outcomes would be entirely unrelated to BoM, since BoM did not choose to be carried about in its vat.

How, then, does OG-M—a woman who keeps her thoughts on D entirely within her head—differ from BoM ethically? In other words, why is it that OG-M’s opinions of D matter, whereas BoM’s do not? The answer to this question, it seems, exposes the primary flaw in Murdoch’s reasoning on the ethical primacy of vision: it certainly appears ostensibly as if OG-M’s change in attitude toward D matters morally. However, in light of the aforementioned comparison between OG-M and BoM, it becomes clear that this change in attitude is meaningful solely because of its potential to effect change. If, as in BoM’s situation, this potential is entirely eliminated, then the ethical meaning of the attitude change is lost, as well.

In this same vein, then, it goes to say that if even a remote chance existed that BoM could someday be synced with a computer—and therefore finally able to communicate again, to effect change in the world—then its *vision* would certainly matter. The ethical salience of BoM’s musings would rest on the potential that they hold to dictate future action—in this particular case, action in the form of communication. Likewise, the only reason that OG-M’s thoughts matter is because of the potential that *they* carry. OG-M’s change of attitude, even if left unexpressed for a time, never loses its potential—and, by extension, its moral meaning—so long as she, the messenger, is alive and breathing. The hypotheticals, the ways in which her attitude could effect change—leading her to treat others, including D, with more kindness, for instance, or leading her to express her opinions, thereby influencing someone else—do not cease to exist when she decides to keep things to herself. Rather, because she is a living human, her active vision will always carry ethical meaning, since it is impossible to know whether, at any future point in her life, this vision will influence her enactment of agency.

Murdoch, however, seeks to separate the cause and its effect: she wants vision to matter always, not because of its potential, but rather because of its intrinsic value. This explains why Murdoch would likely argue that OG-M's forever unexpressed change of attitude toward D, sealed by her own death, is morally meaningful. She sees OG-M's vision as meaningful *per se*, whereas I see it as meaningful in a contingent sense. OG-M's change in vision is, in some ways, like Schrödinger's Cat: it both matters and does not matter, and exists in this state so long as it has the potential to come in contact with the external world. If and when this change in vision does touch the world, its wavefunction finally collapses into a concrete state of value. If the change in vision does not touch the world, though—if, as with OG-M, its potential dies in conjunction with the agent herself—then its contingent value disappears. Altogether, then, these two counterexamples demonstrate that vision is important only insofar as it is capable of effecting change in the world.

REFERENCES

Murdoch, Iris. 2013. *The Sovereignty of Good*. New York: Routledge.