

Moral Productivity Theater

Drew Chambers

Forthcoming in *Iris Murdoch: Literature and Philosophy in Dialogue* (Palgrave Macmillan)

Do not cite – Please cite only publication version when available

1 Introduction

Busywork hounds us. As kids, we lament the busywork our teachers give us. Later, beset by bloated organizational hierarchies, crushing pressure from the corporate technocracy to prove one's labor, and an ever-widening distance from creative work, people reach for what has come to be called productivity theater: activity with the shape of work and none of the substance—busywork reinvented. Some productivity theater is consciously theater, in which one knows they are feigning work. But a result of the current labor landscape is that for many a worker, productivity theater does not feel like theater. Certain tasks—like attending meetings and sending emails—keep us busy and feel matched to our job descriptions *in toto*, even while their contextual, let alone intrinsic, value is diminished.

This chapter is about a moral version of the same phenomenon: activity with the shape of moral thought and none of the most important substance, thereby sparing us from moral understanding and all of its consequences. Like general productivity theater, moral productivity theater is sometimes conscious, as in grandstanding, deception, and whitewashing. But much of the time, moral theater is performed in good faith under mental conditions of sincerity by people who would be startled to hear they had been morally avoiding anything. Iris Murdoch is someone particularly interested in the ways we obscure moral reality and the motivations we have for doing so. To make my case, I will draw on Murdoch's philosophical writings before turning to her fiction to flesh out the kinds of evasion she thinks are endemic to our moral lives.

In the next section, I will sketch out a low-commitment account of moral understanding that relies on modest claims that cut across the various accounts of moral understanding on offer. Following that, I will motivate the claim that we avoid moral understanding. Here I will also turn to a distinctly Murdochian claim about the distinction between imagination and fantasy in the pursuit of moral understanding. Following the theoretical construction, I will then examine *The Bell*, one of Murdoch's early novels that predates the bulk of her philosophical writing. I argue that *The Bell* offers two competing images of moral productivity theater in the characters of Michael and James, the two de facto leaders of a lay religious community called Imber Court. Both characters express moral views that

sound lifted straight from Murdoch's moral philosophy, which give them the appearance of valuable moral cognition, but which, taken in isolation, result in the avoidance of true moral insight. Finally, I will consider some possible objections to my argument.

2 Moral Understanding

There are many accounts of moral understanding on offer, most of which revolve around the possibility of acquiring moral understanding from testimony.¹ These accounts are typically then divided into reductive accounts and non-reductive accounts, distinguished on the basis of whether moral understanding is reducible to moral knowledge.² For the purposes of examining moral productivity theater, we do not need to endorse a very particular account of moral understanding. Any account of moral understanding should minimally have four commitments that I take to be relatively non-controversial for any moral realist. First, moral cognition—a precondition for moral understanding—is unavoidable. Second, moral understanding is answerable to its object. Third, moral understanding is neither easily nor fully had. Fourth, moral understanding implicates the agency of its possessor. A line from Iris Murdoch connects some of these commitments: “Since morality is compulsory (we cannot avoid moral choices) some form of moral cognition is compulsory and we have to set up at least the forms of a distinction between what is real and what is not” (1993, p. 385).

The unavoidability of moral cognition

Morality is compulsory because as practical agents our actions are normatively assessable. There is no total opt-out of practical reasoning and to opt out would itself be an exercise of practical reasoning. Given that we are damned to make moral choices, we are therefore saddled with moral thought, the fact of which should be plain to anyone. We routinely consider the choice worthiness of our actions and reflect after the fact with moral consideration about the justifiability (or, with regret, the unjustifiability) of the choices we

¹ See, for instance, Boyd, 2020; Hopkins, 2007; and Howell, 2014.

² Reductionists assert that moral understanding is reducible to knowledge. A notable proponent of reductionism, Paulina Sliwa, puts it this way: “According to reductionism, knowledge is all there is to understanding; there is no need to stipulate a novel cognitive state that goes over and beyond knowledge” (2017, p. 526). Sliwa situates her position as a response to Alison Hills, who argues that moral understanding is captured notably in cognitive control of moral reasons: “Moral understanding involves a grasp of the relation between a moral proposition and the reasons why it is true” (2009, p. 101). Hills's account and other non-reductionist accounts are sometimes referred to as ability accounts or manipulationist accounts, where understanding culminates in an ability to manipulate what one understands for new uses (Callahan, 2018; Nickel, 2001).

make.³ Moral cognition, however, is not found merely in the discrete mode of deliberative thought. This is because we do not first encounter our circumstances neutrally and then decide whether to add a moral reading in the process of deliberation. We are morally involved and engaged in practical reasoning even in moments of inaction because, as Murdoch stresses, our practical reasoning acts contextually. To act practically, we also need to have an adequate description of our contexts, which itself involves thought. Elijah Millgram describes the point here: “Most standard ways of seeing the problem space take practical reasoning to proceed from a description of a decision situation, one that is treated as simply given, to a practical conclusion [...] But [...] the hard part of practical reasoning is getting the description of your situation right in the first place” (2005, p. 175). Before a person can grasp why an action is wrong, they must have cognized their circumstances under some description, and the cognition is itself an exercise of moral discrimination or a failure of one. A person who putatively declines to consider a situation or insists that there is no consideration to be done does not thereby avoid moral cognition. Rather, such a person holds whatever view was already in place, whether inherited or habituated.

The answerability to moral reality

Understanding, like knowledge, is a success notion; there is something *to be* understood and one can have more or less understanding (or misunderstanding) of that thing. This commitment can be put in weaker or stronger terms. In a weak sense, moral cognition operates within the landscape of our “regular” cognition, which itself is answerable to what is real. There are such things as persons, relationships, laws, weather systems, and so on, all of which allow for degrees of understanding, the lack of which would seriously morally hamstring us. In the strong sense, there are independent moral features of the world to be understood; our moral cognition is found lacking when we fail to accurately understand these moral features. For herself, Murdoch would insist that all features of the world are moral and therefore include the putatively non-moral features, where the intermingling of fact with value gives morality its force: “The authority of morals is the authority of truth, that is of reality” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 374). The minimal commitment need not, however, entail a stance on what moral facts are or where they are located. It is a point simply about the structure of the achievement: if there is moral understanding to be had, there is something of which it is understanding, and a person can stand nearer to it or further from it.

³ I take it that this view is neutral with regard to whether moral “oughts” are conceivable. For instance, even within a framework that takes morality to be a system of hypothetical, rather than categorical, imperatives, as Phillipa Foot’s (1972) does, there still exists agent-relative (or species-relative) moral cognition.

The difficulty of moral understanding

In her seminal paper on moral understanding, Hills asserts, “Moral questions are often hard. Which actions are morally right and wrong is not always obvious, nor is it obvious why they are right or wrong, nor is it straight-forward to make moral judgments in unfamiliar circumstances” (2009, p. 120). These claims seem true enough in experience. Any person’s understanding of the moral concepts upon which they draw in ordinary life is rightly said to be limited, but moreover, the concepts themselves are limited in their application and unfinished in their development. There are infinite circumstances a moral agent can face, many of which are inconceivable until their arrival, whether thanks to new technologies, for instance, or just the novel arrangement of particular personal histories. That moral understanding is not had once and for all is true even if one of the moral theories on offer is itself true as theorized. Since ethics must answer to the whole of human life, where considerations of welfare, obligation, character, and circumstance intersect, it is doubtful that the whole of ethics has yet been captured without remainder. Murdoch would have it that moral activity is coextensive with consciousness itself: a “daily hourly minutely business of apprehending what is real, extending down to our perception of the minutest things” (Murdoch, 1993, p. 304). The world our moral activity answers to is “free, ambiguous, endlessly contingent,” so no conceptual scheme can totalize it (Murdoch, 1993, p. 196). Our moral endeavors, then, “are characteristically endless not only because ‘within’, as it were, a given concept our efforts are imperfect, but also because as we move and as we look our concepts themselves are changing” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 321).

The demands of moral understanding

Moral understanding, though involving intellectual abilities, is practical. Whatever moral understanding one has stands in the space of reasons and manifests in judgment, feeling, and action. If our moral understanding is understanding of obligations, then that understanding is, as Bernard Williams writes, “an input into practical decision. [Obligations] are only one kind of ethical input, constituting one kind of ethical consideration among others” (1995, p. 205). Whether we agree with value pluralists like Williams and Susan Wolf (1982), or whether we side with a stricter view of practical rationality, our moral understanding makes claims on us as moral agents. Moral realizations compel us, and our moral understanding guides us. Moreover, and what constitutes one pertinent difference between moral understanding and understanding in other domains, is that we, as moral agents, stand among the objects of our own moral understanding. We belong to the situations we must comprehend, and how the comprehension comes out affects our standing, our guilt, and our self-regard. It follows that exercising moral understanding is

itself conduct, and assessable in the ways that conduct is assessable. With Murdoch, we can then say that a person can be answerable not only for how they act but also for how they see—or fail to see—the world.

These four commitments set the stage for the subtle ways we avoid moral understanding and why we are motivated to do so.

3 Moral Productivity Theater

In her landmark paper “Modern Moral Philosophy,” G. E. M. Anscombe opens with three theses. The second thesis, that the moral “ought” is a vestige of a moral philosophy that has lost traction and therefore ought to be jettisoned, has proved to be the one with the greatest staying power, followed by the third, which contends that the differences in English moral philosophies from Sidgwick to the ‘50s are largely unimportant. The first thesis is that explanations belonging to ethics “cannot even be begun until we are equipped with a sound philosophy of psychology” (Murdoch, 1962, p. 4). Moral philosophers, per Anscombe, need conceptual analyses of “action,” “intention,” “pleasure,” and “wanting” before moving on to analyses of “virtue,” all of which will shore up a foundation for a post-law conception of ethics, retrieving, to use Talbot Brewer’s (2009) term, a conception originating in Aristotle.

Murdoch would say that Anscombe does not go far enough. For Murdoch, it is not enough—or rather it is not possible or desirable—to bifurcate these analyses, first to psychology and then over to ethics: “‘What this is like’, what I ‘see it as’ is not a problem which can be, as it were, handed over to empirical psychology and then received back in a helpfully sorted state; non-scientific concepts, value concepts, philosophical concepts are involved in setting the scene, indicating what we want to characterise and why” (Murdoch, 1993, p. 305). Moral philosophy is *continuous* with (rather than posterior to) moral psychology, because of how implicated mental states and qualities of consciousness are in constituting the very moral questions and activities comprising the study of moral philosophy. Moral understanding, far from being defined by the grasp of obligation, permission, and prohibition, entails the full range of a person’s inner life, because when “moments of decision arrive we see and are attracted by the world we have already (partly) made” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 200).

In conceptions of morality that emphasize “as the centre of ‘the moral’ the situation of [an agent] making a definite choice [...] and defending it by reasons containing reference to facts,” ability (e.g., “defense”) and knowledge (e.g., “reasons,” “facts”) are both central

(Murdoch, 1999, p. 81). However, if we conceptualize the center of moral philosophy as seeing the world in a certain way, then moral understanding is not so much about a delimited state of knowledge or an intellectual ability to choose rationally but rather about being in a position to “grasp,” “see,” or “get” the world—all colloquial terms we typically associate with understanding something.

Moral understanding on such a conception is perspectival and relational. The target of our understanding depends on our having a certain conception of it, where a conception is “less like a movable and extensible ring laid down to cover a certain area of fact, and more like a total difference of Gestalt” (Murdoch, 1956, pp. 40-41). When we understand a moral concept, we recognize a whole that is viewed from a certain vantage point, and we see in that whole how its parts relate to one another. Consequently, “communication of a new moral concept cannot necessarily be achieved by specification of factual criteria open to any observer [...] but may involve the communication of a completely new, possibly far-reaching and coherent, vision” (Murdoch, 1956, pp. 40-41).

Murdoch’s moral philosophy is particularly relevant to building an account of moral productivity theater by demonstrating why people are motivated to avoid moral understanding, why they engage in behavior that has the form of moral thought to do so, and why these kinds of avoidant activities are often earnestly thought to be non-avoidant.

The four commitments of the prior section jointly produce a demanding task. As moral agents, moral cognition is compulsory; its object is real and at least not exhaustively constructed by the individual agent; understanding of that object is difficult and never finished; and whatever understanding we achieve makes claims on us, both in its practical mode of representation and since we stand among its objects. A theory of moral productivity theater needs an account of what an ordinary moral agent does to convincingly but non-productively take up this task. Murdoch’s contribution is to treat a large class of failures of moral understanding as motivated productions. Her moral psychology is organized around the fact that we have interests in avoiding moral insight and a host of methods for protecting us from it:

The psyche is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself. In some ways it resembles a machine; in order to operate it needs sources of energy, and it is predisposed to certain patterns of activity. The area of its vaunted freedom of choice is not usually very great. One of its main pastimes is day-dreaming. It is reluctant to face unpleasant realities. Its consciousness is not normally a transparent glass through which it views the world, but a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie

designed to protect the psyche from pain. It constantly seeks consolation, either through imagined inflation of self or through fictions of a theological nature. (Murdoch, 1999, p. 364)

In this passage from “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts,” Murdoch restates a recurrent claim of hers: the concept of choice is overprivileged among her contemporary moral philosophers while the conditions that issue in action and the mental activities accompanying those conditions are underemphasized. In order to avoid the pain of moral indictment or the labor of moral summons that come with moral understanding, we seek consolation—in the form of authority-endorsement or fantasies of the self—that whatever we take to be our moral understanding is in fact the genuine article.

The motivation to avoid moral understanding

If moral understanding engages the agency of its possessor, then clear vision is routinely a summons (cf. Bilgrami, 2016; Setiya, 2013). The world our understanding answers to is “free, ambiguous, endlessly contingent” (Murdoch, 1993, p. 196). Accurate moral vision issues claims on our practical reasoning, may undermine self-images that flatter us, may plunge us into disequilibrium, and may generate work for us. As an archetypical example of the costs of moral understanding, consider Megan Phelps-Roper’s testimony of leaving Westboro Baptist Church:

And in a moment of horrifying clarity, I finally saw what had eluded me for so long: [...] There was something terribly wrong at Westboro. God was not in this place. We were not special. Not hand-selected by the Lord to do His divine work. We were a deluded people. As my thoughts slowed, I came back to the present, the melody of a new song drifting into my awareness. It was gentle and somber and yearning, and it sounded like I would never be happy again. (2019, p. 159-163)

Phelps-Roper’s realization that Westboro, its views and her involvement within it, was morally and epistemically bankrupt came with costs:

outside of Westboro, I was nothing. Within the church, I was a cherished daughter—I wielded no power, but my skills were many and useful and valued. I was dependable, and trustworthy, and called upon frequently. I had built my life and identity around the church, and I was well-beloved. Who was I on the outside? I was the perpetrator of untold amounts of harm in the world. I was a lover of tragedy, cruelly attacking the grieving at their most vulnerable. I was a willing

participant in the most aggressive anti-gay picketing campaign the country had ever seen. What reason did anyone have to give me a second chance? [...] there was no hope for me on the outside. No one would ever understand. All was lost. (Phelps-Roper, 2019, p. 166)

Not only did Phelps-Roper have to reckon with the moral judgment her newfound moral understanding placed on her, but she also had to face the fact that the practical implications of her insight—leaving and renouncing the church—would mean the loss of friends and family and an arduous path of building a new life without credibility or resources.

There are a few things that follow from Murdoch's analysis and Phelps-Roper's story. First, moral understanding is not limited to just moral principles and frameworks. Ergo, coming to moral understanding is not always the process of coming to have one's moral bedrock broken up to be replaced by some radical new foundation. Sometimes, it issues in having one's moral bedrock put into play in surprising and novel ways. Second, the avoidance of moral understanding is not necessarily the specialty of the vicious. Per Murdoch, it is a common setting of an ordinary mind: "The human mind is naturally and largely given to fantasy. Vanity (a prime human motive) is composed of fantasy. Neurotic or vengeful fantasies, erotic fantasies, delusions of grandeur, dreams of power, can imprison the mind, impeding new understanding, new interests and affections, possibilities of fruitful and virtuous action" (Murdoch, 1993, p. 322). Third, the consolation discussed above comes in more than one currency. It can come in the form of inflation, as in the fantasies listed by Murdoch, but it can equally come in the form of shelter, as in the case of Westboro Baptist members: by the safety, belonging, and determinacy of a shared scheme that promises certainty. Both currencies cash out the same way, which is in exemption from the uncertain, effortful, and unfinished business of genuine moral thought. However, the insight of moral productivity theater is that it's a form of moral evasion that takes the form of moral thought. Consequently, it would be mistaken, for purposes of that analysis, to focus on forms of moral evasion that resemble putting one's head in the sand.

Why avoidance takes the form of moral thought

There are many ways one can aim to avoid moral insight such as constantly trying to distract oneself from moral concerns; that moral thought is compulsory means that attempts to abstain from moral thought are not blameless. The moral productivity theater argument owes an explanation of why moral avoidance takes the theatrical form when cheaper, formless evasion like mere distraction is available. By the theatrical form, I mean patterns of thought and expression that seem to us and others to be meaningful pursuits of moral

insight. On Murdoch's moral psychology, there are two prominent modes of thought that are obstructing of moral insight but convincingly moral in form.

The first mode is what Murdoch calls fantasy. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch draws "a distinction between egoistic fantasy and liberated truth-seeking creative imagination," with the fantasy "somewhat mechanically generating narrowly banal false pictures (the ego as all-powerful), and [imagination] freely and creatively exploring the world, moving toward the expression and elucidation [...] of what is true and deep" (Murdoch, 1993, p. 321). In cognition, both faculties present similarly: they are both pictorial, narrative, judgment-issuing, and so on. It can be difficult, whether inside from the agent's own perspective or outside from another's perspective, to adjudicate when thought is fantastical and when it is imaginative (which, for Murdoch, is to say realistic).⁴ Fantasy can present as deep engagement with moral questions, racking one's brain with consideration of one's behavior and one's moral concepts. Such a mode of thought stands in stark contrast to the individual who seemingly never considers their conduct and seemingly never ponders moral questions. Against the backdrop of that stark contrast, the very mode of thought obstructing moral insight—fantasy—can seem very much like the mode of thought of a saint.

The second mode is less fantastical (though it may still earn the badge of fantasy for Murdoch). Here the agent does not misdirect the work of vision but rather delegates it to convention, some ready-made public scheme. This mode takes it that the labor of moral thought is already done and is simply in need of retrieval. The forms of moral thought arrive from the world already completed, and to deploy them is to think morally in the only sense the agent has received. Rather than being an energetic production of fantasy, it is the vision left unexercised in either direction (toward imagination or facade), surrendered to "a social whole which we allow uncritically to determine our reactions" (Murdoch, 1999, p. 216). Importantly, conventionality is not the same as having shared concepts or settled habits; habits "can dull us and blind us, but we need useful habits and ought to develop virtuous habits" (Murdoch, 1993, p. 218). Habits, traditions, codes, ordinary language and so on are not inherently obstructive of moral understanding but taking them as exhausting the content of moral understanding is.

⁴ For an instructive analysis of imagination and reality in Murdoch, see Diamond (2010). In the article, Diamond demonstrates the way that imagination, like art, involves creative capacities that, rather than obscuring reality, help illuminate it and thereby draw us toward ways of acting: "If good actions can be attractive, it is in part through the imaginative power of the concepts we can deploy in thinking and seeing the reality in which we need to act" (2010, p. 72).

Both of these modes of thought, though obstructive, are convincingly mistakable for real moral thought. The fantastical counterfeit of moral thought is struck from a similar cognitive mold. Fantasy, like imagination, is busy and articulate, and it results in descriptions of situations, reasons for conclusions, episodes of self-examination, and a sense of effort. The conventional counterfeit is assembled from public tokens of moral thought sourced from religion or identity group, and its emptiness lies in the absence of work behind the conventional expressions. In either case, it is natural from the inside and outside to think that moral thought is present because of how many hallmarks of moral thought these ersatz versions present. Nonetheless, on Murdoch's view, a missing hallmark constitutes an equally important, if not more important, act: the act of attention.⁵

The descriptions of these counterfeit forms of moral thought do not in and of themselves provide an explanation of why a moral agent would avoid moral insight through forms of thought that pass for the genuine pursuit of moral understanding. There are two pressures that provide the explanatory account alongside the descriptive account. First, bare avoidance postpones the moral demand rather than eliminating it. We are confronted by situations that perplex us, we are forced to act, and we are often prompted by others to account for our actions. To return to the workplace productivity analog, we still show up for work, we're still observed by our supervisors, and we still need to convincingly speak to our coworkers about the work we've been doing. Fantasy and convention help us meet these demands, at least superficially, in our eyes and the eyes of others.

Second, the ego wants the goods of moral standing along with exemption from its costs. The internal goods of moral standing are consolation that one's life is justifiable. We can prise apart, however, the consolation of goodness from the consolation of labor and the consolation of determinism. The consolation of goodness is a way that counterfeit moral thought can convince one that one is good; we review the events of our day in our minds with an eye to convincing ourselves that we acted well and that the nagging guilt is, on examination, unnecessary. Murdoch, however, is particularly concerned with the latter two kinds of consolation. The consolation of labor is a second-order moral consolation. Our first-order judgments about the quality of our actions are celebrated as a marker of moral cognitive labor; we are consoled not by the goodness of our actions but by the capacity of our ostensible moral awareness. The consolation of determinism can take on religious or secular overtones. Consider Murdoch on the concept of original sin: "It may of course also be used as a fantasizing protection of the ego, a deterministic myth, concealing chance and

⁵ For a book-length treatment of Murdoch's views on the ethics of attention and attention's role in moral thought, see Panizza (2022). Panizza's book also demonstrates the relationship between Murdoch's conception of attention and Simone Weil's conception of attention from which Murdoch derived her own.

obliterating freedom, and making everything we do seem innocent because inevitable” (Murdoch, 1993, p. 103). Under this guise, we can feel consoled that only God can save us or that there is nothing to save because the world and our actions within it are incontrovertible.

So long as we are moral agents, we are encumbered, or perhaps graced, with the summons to moral thought. As is obviously true, we can, however, do without moral insight. To keep up appearances and to console our hungry egos, we can turn to counterfeit thought that seems to meet the summons and yet avoid the moral-epistemic payoff. Murdoch’s description of consolation “through imagined inflation of self” is helpful: attempts to ignore the moral dimensions of our lives forfeit the self-image of moral seriousness, and theater is the only product that putatively allows us to avoid moral insight while ironically seeming morally serious.

Why the theater does not feel like theater

Theater implies some consciousness on the part of the actors. In the phenomena I describe above, though, it seems to be the case that the evaders of understanding are unaware of their evasion. Does theater need to be conscious to be theater? Consider again the analog of productivity theater in the workplace. We look for ways to not just appear productive but also to *feel* productive. A murky standard of productivity, which plagues so many white-collar industries, allows for wider justification of productive labor. It is not the case that workers always or even generally think of themselves as faking work, going through the motions, and deceiving supervisors and colleagues. Instead, the theater of it all becomes so diffuse that theatrics are scarcely distinguishable from the genuine article. The same can be said for moral productivity theater, which means that the patterns of counterfeit moral thought need not be recognized as counterfeit even by us, the counterfeiters.

Murdoch’s moral psychology removes the backstage from which conscious theater can operate, and it does so more thoroughly than talk of self-deception usually suggests. Even though moral cognition is compulsory, no one invents *ex nihilo* the structures within which it operates. Our forms of moral thinking are received from our churches, schools, social classes, cultures, and beyond. We may metabolize them and make them our own, but they are not purely private. For a great many people, the operative model of moral cognition just is consulting God’s law or checking a case against one’s intuitions (or the testimony of one’s therapist or friends) or the strenuous examination of one’s own soul.

When people engage in this kind of moral thought (where the extent of the thought is circumscribed by the law or oneself), they may obstruct moral insight, but nonetheless they may do so with whatever sincerity and effort they can muster to engage in what moral thought is by their lights. Murdoch says that neurosis and convention are the enemies of understanding, but if the received model of moral thought is neurotic or conventional then neurosis and convention may not strike one as moral theater or obfuscating of understanding. This is why Murdoch urges us “to return from the self-centred concept of sincerity to the other-centred concept of truth” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 293):

We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy. Our current picture of freedom encourages a dream-like facility; whereas what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons. We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being; it is through an enriching and deepening of concepts that moral progress takes place. Simone Weil said that morality was a matter of attention, not of will. We need a new vocabulary of attention. (Murdoch, 1999, p. 293)

If Murdoch’s diagnosis is right, then many of us are performing moral theater in good faith and under mental conditions of sincerity despite the fact that the kinds of moral thought that lead to moral understanding are far more difficult than riding along in the grooves of our inherited moral pictures.

The two enemies of understanding

In her essay “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,” Murdoch sketches out two archetypes of an agent, one for the embodiment of each mode of counterfeit moral thought elaborated above. The first, taking up the reins of fantasy and neurosis, she calls “Totalitarian Man.” The second, relying on convention, she calls “Ordinary Language Man.”

Ordinary Language Man traffics in the busywork of the moral life. They rely on verdicts that derive from apparently brute description of the facts, appeals to what is forbidden and commanded as summative of the moral situation, cases checked against law, the diligent administration of their moral memberships, and so on. They are fluent in a shared moral vocabulary, but they mistake their fluency for guaranteed contact with what is morally case.

Their activity is hard work—there are rules to be mastered, verdicts to be gotten right, standards of correctness to be met—but their effort is spent entirely within the scheme.

Totalitarian Man traffics in the strenuous attention to their own self: scrupulosity, guilt-cycling, the repetitive re-litigation of their own standing, the redescription of every situation in terms of their own grand narrative. This kind of thought feels hard and is often painful, which means it presents itself as compatible with the belief that moral understanding is complex and hard-won. Pain here functions as consolation's alibi; the idea goes that one cannot be avoiding something if one is suffering so much and working so hard to grapple with their moral character.

Both forms satisfy, from the inside, the felt criteria of moral thought and the escape from one is often into the confines of the other. The person who flees deadening convention might instead flee into self-drama. The person who flees their own chaos reaches for rules and certainty. Murdoch's novel *The Bell*, I will now argue, is built on exactly this trade. The two leaders of the novel's central community each exhibit distinctively Murdochian claims about moral philosophy but nonetheless fall into registers that exhibit the conventionality of Ordinary Language Man and the neurosis of Totalitarian Man.

4 *The Bell*

The Bell is a story about the people of Imber Court, a lay community of Anglicans who foster a semi-monastic life on the grounds of a large estate neighboring an abbey of Anglican Benedictine nuns. As mentioned, I will focus on two of the novel's characters: its de facto co-leaders Michael Meade and James Tayper Pace.⁶ Michael is a former schoolteacher and former priest-aspirant whose family owns the Imber estate. James is a self-sacrificing, principled "man's man" with a decorated military and service background.

When Michael was 25, he was dismissed from a teaching post for being romantically involved with a fourteen-year-old male student named Nick, who now lives at Imber but is spurned by Michael.⁷ During the events of the novel, Michael grows closer with a visitor

⁶ I am remiss to not also discuss here the many other rich characters that feature in the story's narrative. Most notably absent from my analysis are Dora and Toby, the two other characters, aside from Michael, whose interiority are narrated for the reader. Toby plays a central role vis-à-vis Michael, but Dora is often, when it comes to Michael, in the background. For readings that place Dora at the center of the novel, see Crowley (2020), Hashimoto (2001), and Wagner-Lawlor (2011).

⁷ It is difficult to know how best to describe Michael's treatment of Nick and Michael's treatment of Toby. The book, written in 1962, predates language of grooming, predation, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. Realizing that what happens between Michael and Nick and Michael and Toby is itself a moral determination, I try my best to not beg the question for or against Michael. It is said, without further detail, that Michael was

to Imber named Toby Gashe. Toby is a young, sheltered eighteen-year-old, set to matriculate at Oxford following his stay at Imber. At the zenith of their attachment, Michael finds himself kissing Toby on a drunken but passionate impulse. Nick witnesses Toby and Michael's kiss and blackmails Toby into confessing Michael's advances to James. As a result, Michael resigns, the Imber community project disbands, and Nick dies tragically by suicide, leaving Michael heartbroken and racked with guilt.

Two sermons, delivered on successive Sundays by James and then Michael, provide the novel its centerpieces, each offering a complete miniature moral philosophy, and each constructed as the other's antithesis. James begins his sermon saying, "The chief requirement of the good life is to live without any image of oneself" (Murdoch, 1962, p. 131). Michael begins his sermon saying, "The chief requirement of the good life is that one should have some conception of one's capacities" (Murdoch, 1962, p. 200). After his sermon, Michael stumbles from the dais wondering "how obvious it had been that he was saying the exact opposite of what James had been saying last week" (Murdoch, 1962, p. 205).

The essay in which Murdoch introduced the foils for her own moral philosophy—Ordinary Language Man and Totalitarian Man—was published a year after *The Bell*. Michael and James, both in their actions throughout the novel and their expressions of their own moral philosophies as captured in their sermons, are fleshed out representations—though imperfect—of these foils.⁸ Ordinary Language Man and Totalitarian Man demonstrate the

"seduced at his public school at the age of fourteen" (Murdoch, 1962, p. 99). Michael's first encounter with Nick occurred when Michael was 25 and Nick was 14, while the contemporary events of the novel occur while Michael is 39 and Toby is 18. In neither relationship (whether predatory or not), did sex occur, however the age-of-consent in Great Britain was 16 and sex between men was criminalized (until 1967 when sex between men was decriminalized for all men over 21). Per the consent laws at the time, then, Nick would not have been in a position to consent to sex with Michael, while Toby would have been able to in the eyes of the law, though any sex between them would have nevertheless been criminal. I do not take it as obvious how Murdoch would have morally characterized either relationship along the dimension of consent and predation, though pointing out that her views on sexuality suggest she would not have condemned the relationships on the basis of being same-sex. In what follows, I will do my best to focus on Michael's characterization of his actions and the consequences in which they result, noting that in both cases Michael characterizes his behavior as wrong to some degree and that Michael's actions contribute to a great deal of emotional turmoil in all three characters and undoubtedly some part in Nick's suicide.

⁸ I am not the first to read James and Michael through these two figures, though my original conception of them as such came before I had read any secondary literature on the novel, which perhaps add credence to the theory. Byatt (1965) reads James as Ordinary Language Man and Michael as Totalitarian Man, while cautioning that convention and neurosis do not operate in the novel as "total patterning devices" (Byatt, 1965, p. ##). Todd (2019) and Kaehele and German (1967) likewise connect Michael's sense of destiny to Murdoch's account of Totalitarian Man. Levenson (2001) and Masong (2008) organize their readings of the novel around the opposition between convention and neurosis, though Levenson locates the neurotic pole in Nick rather than Michael. On the two sermons specifically, see Crowley (2020) who finds them "divergent

way that Murdoch's moral philosophy is not altogether at odds with the analytics of Oxford (the camp encapsulated in Ordinary Language Man) or the French existentialists (the camp encapsulated in Totalitarian Man). Each model of moral philosophy taken alone fails to account for important features of Murdoch's own moral philosophy, some of which are accounted for by the competing model.

Ordinary Language Man is the moral agent as pictured by Murdoch's contemporary linguistic empiricists. Ordinary Language Man is "subject to rules, surrounded by a civilised society, surrounded in short by the network of ordinary language, that is, for these purposes, by the network of moral conceptual activity at its most common and universally accepted level" (Murdoch, 1999, p. 268). On this picture, the activity of the mind can only be called such through its connection with outer activity, which means that, on the view, "morally speaking a man is what he observably does. As in the philosophy of Kant, we turn away from the chaos of empirical inwardness to the clarity of overt action" (Murdoch, 1999, p. 268). What matters not on this picture is the agent's own psychology, both because meaning is delivered externally (through public agreement) and because what fundamentally matters morally is behavior.

Totalitarian Man is the agent as pictured by Sartre and "displayed in terms of a dramatic Hegelian psychology." He "mistrusts his inner life," but "he dramatises his situation in a myth"; he is "like a neurotic who seeks to cure himself by unfolding a myth about himself," driven by "a desire for our lives to have the form and clarity of something necessary, and not accidental" (Murdoch, 1999, pp. 268-69). In his world "there are other people, but they are not real contingent separate other people. They appear as organised menacing extensions of the consciousness of the subject" (Murdoch, 1999, p. 269). This "existentialist line of thought" suggests both "that spiritual understanding emerges especially *in extremis*" and "that people who lead quiet orderly lives are less spiritual than those who are errant and tormented" (Murdoch, 1993, p. 417; emphasis in original). On this picture of the moral life, the locus of moral concern is the "whole man" and the agent's ability to wrestle with his will where the greater the struggle, the greater the payoff. The agent's own psychology matters more than it does to Ordinary Language Man, because the agent is at the center and the public, including other people, gains significance largely as props for the individual's struggled choices.

and non-congruous rather than complementary," and Giffin (2007) who casts them as deontological and teleological outlooks respectively. In all these cases, there is little focus on the way that the characters avoid true moral insight through accepted models of moral thought or the way that James's and Michael's sermons need not be seen as competing models of moral life.

On their own, both moral agentic models are solipsistic because neither “provides us with a standpoint for considering real human beings in their variety, and neither presents us with any technique for exploring and controlling our own spiritual energy” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 269). Ordinary Language Man is “too abstract, too conventional” and Totalitarian Man is “too concrete, too neurotic” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 269). Though Michael and James make opposite decisions, neither character is able to strike the right balance necessary for the pursuit of genuine moral understanding, which, for Murdoch, inescapably concerns being “the individual in pursuit of the individual” and “responding to the magnetic pull of the idea of perfection” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 334).

There’s a caveat that governs the next two sections. My claim about James and Michael is not that either man holds false moral judgments (though they might), and my argument does not require adjudicating their normative moral claims, particularly with regard to human sexuality. Pieces of both characters’ sermons sound lifted straight from Murdoch’s own philosophy, which suggests, at the least, that it would be misguided to think of either character as an altogether negative example of moral philosophy. My diagnosis concerns how each man’s moral life is conducted—what his effort is spent on and what his cognition answers to—rather than the correctness of his particular moral verdicts. Recall the fourth commitment of §2: we are answerable not only for how we act but for how we see. We can arrive at the right belief by accident and by methods other than those circumscribed by moral understanding. That possibility underscores one of Murdoch’s enduring theses: moral differences can remain invisible if difference exists only at the level of action and belief. The moral significance of the inner life is what makes novels generally, and Murdoch’s novels especially, illuminative of moral philosophy since certain kinds of novels can provide a stage to observe the activity of the mind.

5 James

James’s sermon opens with sentences that echo Murdoch’s most famous concept, unselfing. Does unselfing mean living without any image of oneself? At the very least, Murdoch does morally prize the moments when a person “learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself” (1993, p. 17). James continues his sermon: “The study of personality, indeed the whole conception of personality, is, as I see it, dangerous to goodness”; ideals “are dreams. They come between us and reality—when what we need most is just precisely to see reality. And that is something outside us. Where perfection is, reality is” (Murdoch, 1962, p. 131). These sentiments are strikingly Murdochian in character, but are they too strong?

Again in "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," Murdoch criticizes "the Liberal view of personality" for encouraging "a complete self-absorption of the individual" (1999, p. 278). She agrees with James insofar as he exhorts his listeners to attend to reality, to be moved by perfection, and to not let oneself become consumed by one's own self-image. Yet, the belief undergirding Murdoch's moral philosophy is that personality is far more important than empiricists and liberals grant. Her conclusion is not to throw out personality but to recognize that "freedom is not strictly the exercise of the will" and that "what lies behind and in between actions and prompts them [...] is important, and it is this area which should be purified" (Murdoch, 1999, p. 354).

What James takes to follow from his initial premises is that the labor of moral cognition has already been performed and needs only to be retrieved: "We know in very simple ways, ways so simple that they seem dull to our subtle moral psychologists, what we ought to do and what avoid. Surely we know enough and more than enough rules to live by; and I confess I have very little time for the man who finds his life too complicated and special for the ordinary rules to fit. What are you up to, my friend, what are you hiding?" (Murdoch, 1962, pp. 131-32). The inner life is ruled out as an object of moral interest: "A belief in Original Sin should not lead us to probe the filth of our minds or regard ourselves as unique and interesting sinners. As sinners we are much the same and our sin is essentially something tedious, something to be shunned and not something to be investigated" (Murdoch, 1962, pp. 131-32).

In trying to be perfect (which for Murdoch is not an empty aspiration), James thinks that we "should think of our actions and look to God and to His Law. We should consider not what delights us or what disgusts us, morally speaking, but what is enjoined and what is forbidden" (Murdoch, 1962, p. 132). For a person like James, it is simply the fact that "[t]ruthfulness is enjoined, the relief of suffering is enjoined; adultery is forbidden, sodomy is forbidden" (Murdoch, 1962, p. 132). Morality is dictated and the dictates are uninteresting and unified. They are uninteresting in that they are not to be considered under any guise at all, and they are unified in that they might all reduce to duty or some other primary moral conception. This perspective is armed against the perplexity that the third commitment of Section 2 treats as constitutive of the moral life. On James's telling, the man who finds his life complicated is not facing a hard case but hiding something: "Those who hesitate to judge others are usually those who fear to put themselves under judgement" (Murdoch, 1962, p. 132).

The model of moral thought that James offers recognizes that moral cognition is compulsory, demanding, and answerable to something other than oneself. At face value,

his sermon demonstrates a striving and serious moral philosophy, but is it unconscious theater? The view takes it that morality is simple and that moral understanding is straightforward, and it dismisses contact with the particular and any sort of struggle to understand.

“The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited” sees Murdoch considering T. S. Eliot’s criticism of the Liberal “cult of personality,” and her response to Eliot sounds like a perfectly apt response to James:

What I like about his criticism is that he accuses the Liberal view of a failure to emphasise the discipline involved in realising that something real exists other than oneself. What I dislike about his criticism is his view of what it is that we are thus to discover outside ourselves, what we are to oppose to the individual. That which should be respected by the individual is according to Eliot [...] in poetry, ‘the thing’, and [in] life, in morality, ‘the institution’, or ‘the dogma’. In neither case is it ‘another person’ whom we should thus treat as separate and real. This is objectionable both because Mr Eliot’s faith in institutions seems to me excessive [...] and because Mr Eliot seems so ready to throw overboard [...] a respect for the individual person as such, however eccentric, private, messy, and generally tiresome he may be. And one aspect of respecting something is being interested enough in it to try to understand it. (1999, p. 275)

James does not want to exalt the allure of depravity and aims to center the moral importance of external reality, but he throws the baby out with the bathwater as Eliot does. The personality is the wellspring of any pretense of choice and the external reality is not just what is “forbidden” and “enjoined,” but also includes the other people—and yes, their personalities—whom we have a duty to pursue, see, and understand.

James perceives in types. Of Nick, he warns Michael: “He looks to me like a pansy [...] They’re always trouble-makers, believe me. I’ve seen plenty of that type” (Murdoch, 1962, p. 116). Of Dora: “Mrs Greenfield is what is popularly called a bitch. I’m sorry to say so, but one must call things by their names. Only endless trouble comes from not doing so” (Murdoch, 1962, p. 228). James is conventional and common in his rather run-of-the-mill conceptions of morality and the world writ large. He struggles to make any sense at all of sexuality not inscribed in social mores. He has no interest in concepts beyond right and wrong and fails to consider the way these thin ethical concepts are thickly constituted in life. In each case the “name” of the thing does not begin the work of perception but completes it and does so with disdain. The moral concepts are themselves dictating what

we can see; a person whose concept of love is limited to heterosexual attraction cannot perceive the love that goes on in non-heterosexual or non-sexual relationships. Someone who relinquishes the importance of secondary concepts altogether is even more woeful. Yet, James is not, in his eyes, shamefully bypassing moral cognition when he sees a “pansy” or a “bitch.” Rather, he is doing everything his model of moral thought contains, which consists in applying convention unceremoniously to his life and others.

The costs of James’s model of moral thinking surface at the novel’s end, when Toby is blackmailed by Nick into confessing his and Michael’s romantic exchanges. It is not clear that Toby’s disclosure should be considered a confession, but seeking penitence is the way Nick characterizes his coercive demands toward Toby: “You’re going to get up now and [...] going to go like a good boy and make your confession to the only available saint, indeed the only available man, and that is James Tayper Pace” (Murdoch, 1962, p. 260). When Toby discloses to James the happenings, James condemns Toby’s choices and sends him summarily home to London: “‘I was pretty serious with him,’ said James. [...] ‘I thought he’d behaved foolishly, even in some ways badly, in relation to both you and Dora, and I told him so. [...] And it had to be met with the seriousness which the case deserved. Anything else would have been too little. [...] I sent him home’” (Murdoch, 1962, p. 294). It is Michael who grasps the way James’s judgment is both imperceptive and yet correct: “How typical of James to do the simple decent thing which was also so damned obtuse” (Murdoch, 1962, p. 295). Michael concedes that “James was quite right in a way,” and reflects that his own way of closing the drama would likely have been no improvement (Murdoch, 1962, p. 295). In sending Toby immediately home, James sends him “loaded with guilt, and involved by James’s solemnity in a machinery of sin and repentance with which he probably had no capacity to deal. [...] By sending Toby away he had branded the thing into the boy’s mind as something appalling; almost any other way of closing the incident would have been better than this one” (Murdoch, 1962, pp. 295). When Michael chastises James for handling Toby in such a way, James responds, “I don’t see why he shouldn’t take his full share of responsibility [...] He’s quite old enough” (Murdoch, 1962, p. 295).

It is not necessarily that James reached wrong verdicts about Toby, or about Michael, whose conduct James condemns as most readers will. The point is that the verdicts are the whole of what happened. At no moment does James undertake the other task for which the situation (and for which all situations) calls: understanding what the experience was for

Toby or for Michael or what was now best for Toby or Michael.⁹ On James's model, the judgment exhausts the moral work, and once judgment is delivered the work is done. Yet, if moral understanding is answerable to a reality that is complexly and ongoingly understood, then a moral life composed of finished verdicts applied unceremoniously and straightforwardly is a standing avoidance of moral thought's real object.

We should avoid partitioning the application of verdicts and the work of understanding. Verdicts can be applied unceremoniously and straightforwardly only when the details of a description of one's circumstance are themselves settled and straightforward, but the work of settling a description is difficult if not impossible. The pursuit of moral understanding for a person like James "is not seen as the activity of theorising, imagining, or seeking for deeper insight" (Murdoch, 1999, p. 177). If we abandon those aspects of moral life, we "omit the continuous detailed conceptual pictorial activity whereby (for better or worse) we make and remake the 'world' within which our desires and reflections move, and out of which our actions arise" (Murdoch, 1993, p. 325). What a conventional morality like James's misses is learning to elaborate one's own conceptions of what embodied morality and, *ipso facto*, attending to particularity involves. "Do not lie because it is forbidden" is a helpful dictum, but the propensity or capacity to follow a dictum does not necessarily entail moral understanding. James's model treats the dictum as the terminus of moral thought and so leaves the deepening undone. The verdict that Toby erred and should leave cannot be settled, because the description of the situation on which it turns is itself contentious.

It would be wrong to judge James as knowingly avoidant of the task of moral understanding. He is not performing correctness while shirking the demands of moral thought in private; correctness is what moral thought is, by his lights, and he pursues it wholeheartedly with a saintlike conviction. His effort and the correctness of judgment are, in him, the very material of the evasion. James is consistent, socially functional, and in many respects admirable, but the Murdochian point is that he is always engaged with the structures of morality and never the particulars within which morality lives.

6 Michael

Readers of *The Bell* have far greater insight into Michael's character than they do James's. Not only is Michael's backstory told in fuller detail, but we also are privileged with Michael's

⁹ Sabina Lovibond (1991) reminds us that we can accurately inform and hone our moral perception through the "the process of seeking out new moral perceptions by cultivating a receptive attitude towards the perceptions reported by others" (p. 198).

internal perspective throughout the book. While with James we ascertain his moral conceptions through his outward speech, we're able to ascertain Michael's conceptions with the additional aid of insight into his mind. This narrative asymmetry suits the diagnosis, since the neurotic counterfeit lives in the inner life that James's sermon exhorts us to see as morally irrelevant.

Michael's sermon answers James's in kind. The chief requirement of the good life is "to know oneself sufficiently to know what is the next thing. One must study carefully how best to use such strength as one has" (Murdoch, 1962, p. 200). Michael's governing moral maxim, contrary to James's counsel to be perfect, is to "perform the lower act which one can manage and sustain: not the higher act which one bungles" (Murdoch, 1962, p. 201). This principle comes in the midst of Michael's analysis of his own missteps with Toby as a kind of akratic paradox:

Michael now saw, that he had performed the action which belonged by right to a better person; and yet too, by an austere paradox, a better person would not have been in the situation that required that action. It would have been possible to conduct the meeting with Toby in an unemotional way which left the matter completely closed; it was only not possible for Michael. [...] It was true that a person of great faith could with impunity have acted boldly: it was only that Michael was not that person. What he had failed to do was accurately to estimate his own resources, his own spiritual level: and it was indeed from his later reflections on this matter that he had, with a certain bitterness, drawn the text for his sermon. (1962, p. 201)

Contrary to James, then, Michael thinks that one's own psychology is the important ingredient in acting morally because "each one of us apprehends a certain kind and degree of reality and from this springs our power to live as spiritual beings" (Murdoch, 1962, p. 204). Consequently, "we must not arrogate to ourselves actions which belong to those whose spiritual vision is higher or other than ours. From this attempt, only disaster will come, and we shall find that the action which we have performed is after all not the high action which we intended, but something else" (Murdoch, 1962, p. 204).

Michael's insistence that the material of our inner life is morally important, both in itself and as a wellspring for doing good, is an insistence Murdoch herself shared. She writes in "On 'God' and 'Good,'" that the self "appears at least to be a sort of continuous background with a life of its own; and it is surely in the tissue of that life that the secrets of good and evil are to be found" (Murdoch, 1999, p. 343). From this premise, she concludes

that a primary focus of moral philosophy should be determining whether there are “any techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 343). An interest in moral interiority is essentially Murdoch’s calling card, but she also endorses Michael’s claim about the relationship between inner activity and outer activity. In an essay on Simone Weil (to whom she attributes the origins of her conception of attention), Murdoch takes a passage from Weil’s (2019) *Gravity and Grace* and admiringly morphs it into her own formulation, drawing again on the notion of “energy”: “All beings tend to use all the power at their disposal. ‘A virtuous action can degrade if there is no available energy at the same level’” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 158). Any of these remarks could have been lifted from Michael’s sermon, but, like James, he is not a mouthpiece for Murdoch.

There exists a tension centered on the self in Murdoch’s philosophical work. On the one hand, the self is the praiseworthy or blameworthy source of moral life. On the other hand, examination of the self is dangerous: it “is such a dazzling object that if one looks *there* one may see nothing else” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 324). I take it that this tension is between two approaches, both unattractive to Murdoch, that she hints at in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*:

Our private reflections, or ‘inner lives’, are soaked in values. Do we not therefore need to inspect and evaluate our own private thought-being, that inner which is so different from our lived outer? [...] Is not some denial or obfuscation of this picture a move in the direction of behaviourism? A step further on and we will be being warned against fantasies, private chatter and idle self-scrutiny. The warning will consist in the removal. (1993, p. 64)

Michael’s self-scrutiny, rather than purifying and reorienting him (to use Murdoch’s words), takes the form of grand narratives and absorbing fantasy. In this pattern, he resembles the Totalitarian Man foil to James’s Ordinary Language Man. James delegates the work of moral vision to the scheme he inhabits, whereas Michael performs it himself, strenuously and continuously, *on* himself and singularly himself, a character at the heart of his own story.

Michael’s narrative precedes every particular it absorbs into it. Michael is said to have always “expected the emergence in his life of patterns and signs. He had always felt himself to be a man with a definite destiny, a man waiting for a call” (Murdoch, 1962, p. 82). Michael’s guiding principle mirrors what Murdoch attributes to the Totalitarian Man as his signature urge: the desire for his life “to have the form and clarity of something necessary, and not

accidental” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 269). Michael’s insistence on there being a pattern for his life leads him to manifest a hubristic confidence in his ability to do the right thing. After some same-sex relationships in college, Michael heads to the boys’ school “certain [...] that he would never again, in any way which could conflict with his now much stricter sense of morality, gratify [his sexual desires]. He had passed through a spiritual crisis and emerged triumphant” (Murdoch, 1962, p. 100). This is not to say that it would be good for Michael to suppress his sexuality, but instead to emphasize his self-narrative which convinced him of his imperviousness to error, whatever may constitute it.

At the outset of Michael and Nick’s relationship, it is said that “Michael knew what he was doing. He knew that he was playing with fire. Yet it still seemed to him that he would escape unscathed” (Murdoch, 1962, p. 103). When Nick tells the head of school about Michael’s behavior, Michael considers it to be an appalling “betrayal of something to him so utterly pure and sacred” made out untruthfully by Nick to be “a rather disgraceful seduction” in which Michael “led him unwillingly into an adventure which he did not understand and from which he had throughout been anxious to escape” (Murdoch, 1962, p. 107). Even years later, once Michael is able to recognize at least some of the predatory nature of his behavior, he still considers Nick to have been “misleading” and to have “confessed” rather than, for instance, reported.

When Nick, thirteen years after last seeing Michael, asks to come to Imber, Michael construes the opportunity to be vitally in accordance with his inevitable life’s narrative:

with the dawning of a strange joy he apprehended in the way things had gone a certain pattern of good. Nick had been brought back to him, surely by no accident. He did not dare to imagine that he was himself to be the instrument of the boy’s salvation; but he thought it possible that he might be destined, in some humble way, to stand by, as one who has a small part in some great ceremony, while this was indeed achieved. He was after all, where Nick was concerned, to have a second chance. He could not be meant to reject it. (Murdoch, 1962, p. 114)

Nick figures here not as an individual *qua* individual, but rather as an installment of Michael’s plot and the occasion of his redemption. It is consoling, in Michael’s mind, to think of himself as having an unavoidable, irresistible destiny, but the morally dangerous consequence of such a view is that other people are just roles within the myth; they “are not real contingent separate other people. They appear as organised menacing extensions of the consciousness of the subject” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 269). Looking for patterns is a way of absolving oneself of responsibility and, at the same time, valorizing oneself as the hero

of one's own story. Michael evades moral understanding—in relevant part the knowledge of the individual through attention—through self-narration: the self-story preemptively absorbs the other into a role. He's not inattentive to Nick and Toby in an ordinary sense—he thinks about them constantly—but his attention is structurally organized around his own myth, so what he sees is a character in his story rather than individuals.

Michael takes solace in conceiving of Nick's return to his orbit as a chance to play an "instrument of the boy's salvation," which mirrors his consoling thoughts during his earlier romantic pursuits: "Vaguely Michael had visions of himself as the boy's spiritual guardian [...] When he had reflected a little Michael felt even better, as if these bold reflections had done something to restore his innocence" (Murdoch, 1962, p. 105). Murdoch warns that when we treat the second-best act as our sufficient moral obligation, "it offers a sort of spiritual exercise and what looks like a spiritual home, a kind of armchair sanctity which may be a substitute for genuine moral effort" (Murdoch, 1993, p. 91). No clearer is the risk of armchair sanctity substituting for genuine moral effort than in Michael's consolations to himself that his relationships with Nick and Toby are about protection rather than seduction.

Michael is conscious that his sermon is an inversion of James's sermon and it also engages with the commitments of §2 in different ways. James's model of putative moral productivity denies the difficulty of moral understanding; Michael's, on the other hand, affirms it, handwringingly. His sermon asserts that moral understanding is graded, that it is unfinished, and that the agent stands among the objects of his own moral comprehension. Consequently, Michael's own apparent labor to self-scrutinize and anguish over the appropriate next narrative scene resembles at first glance the moral work his sermon endorses. Michael acknowledges that "the danger [of the second-best act] was the very danger which James had pointed out: that if one departs from a simple apprehension of certain definite commandments one may become absorbed in the excitement of a spiritual drama for its own sake" (Murdoch, 1962, p. 205). But his acknowledgment is not itself enough to save him. The appropriate and actual salvific answer to drowning in fantasy "is an attachment to what lies outside the fantasy mechanism, and not a scrutiny of the mechanism itself [...] Close scrutiny of the mechanism often merely strengthens its power" (Murdoch, 1999, p. 355). Michael's insight into his own drama arrives as a further scene of the drama. In this way, the mechanism of avoidance has learned to include its own critique.

The novel grants Michael, at terrible cost, what neither sermon could describe. After Nick's suicide, the machinery of consolation breaks rather than bends, Michael reflecting to himself that the "pattern which he had seen in his life had existed only in his own romantic

imagination. At the human level there was no pattern” (Murdoch, 1962, p. 308). Rather than dwelling on Nick and Toby as receiving objects of his own subjectivity, he instead seeks to engage in a kind of repentance through which he can “think about sin without making the thought into a consolation” (Murdoch, 1962, p. 308). His diminished sense of self affirms that he might one day experience “that indefinitely extended requirement that one human being makes upon another” (Murdoch, 1962, p. 309).

Together James and Michael embody Murdoch’s claim that convention and neurosis are enemies of understanding. Michael’s sermon is constructed in overt flight from James’s, away from the deadening simplicity of the rules toward the textured inner life but nonetheless his approach to moral thought lands him in a mire of self-drama. James’s whole moral bearing is using clear moral schemes as a way of steadying against the interior chaos that can leave a person ensnared in fantasy. Neither Michael nor James is an evil man.¹⁰ On the contrary, both strive for better moral understanding and nonetheless experience pitfalls in their pursuit—pitfalls that might befall anyone. Rather than being strictly refuted by the novel, they are depicted as two good-faith performances of moral thought that nonetheless lack the substance of attention that moral understanding demands.

7 **Objections**

There are three pressure points for my account here that I want to briefly address. First, am I begging the question about the correctness of moral judgments and actions in calling Michael and James’s behaviors morally evasive? Second, is my account of productivity theater really just a description of ordinary moral epistemic vice? Third, how can a sincere, effortful person be engaging in productivity theater?

It is interesting to note that Murdoch herself said that in *The Bell*, she gives “three extremely clear types of moral reaction to a certain situation, and I indicate to the reader which is the right one” (2003, p. ##). She does not elaborate in that interview or any other exactly how she would morally assess the characters in the novel. My account separates the specific moral judgments made and actions taken by James and Michael from their patterns of

¹⁰ Critical assessments of the two men vary widely. Osborn (2014) who argues that the retrospective account of Michael and Nick is filtered through Michael’s self-justifying perspective and leaves out Nick’s own voice. Nicol (2007) connects this kind of self-narration to the “personal fable” Murdoch describes in “Vision and Choice in Morality.” Khalid (2018) treats Michael as the novel’s moral touchstone and James as a hypocrite, and Ghaffary (2019) reads Michael’s love as liberating and James’s sermon as Nietzschean “slave morality,” whereas Giffin (2007) argues nearly the reverse by claiming that the novel dismantles Michael’s outlook and leaves James’s untouched. Altorf (2018) argues that the early “talk of lovers” between Michael and Nick is an experience of love demonstrative of Murdoch’s philosophical conception of love as “messy” and unable to be “theorized away” (pp. 32-33).

thought and models of moral inquiry. The account does not rest on James or Michael being wrong (or right) about the morality of homosexuality or their treating Toby or Nick in a morally impermissible (or permissible) way. My diagnosis is about how a view is held, not whether it is correct. The claims about moral evasion relate to the way a moral perspective can be sealed against correction, conveniently self-serving, or ready-made thereby closing one off from the pursuit of understanding in response to new particulars. All of these behaviors can be analyzed without settling the first-order question. What this means is that two people can reach the same moral verdict but through evading or not evading the kind of moral work involved in attention.

A full explanation of how my account of moral productivity theater differs from a vice account of moral epistemology would require more space than I have here, but there are two promising lines of thought to sketch out. First, it is possible to describe individuals like Michael and James in vice terms. James may be closed-minded or arrogant. Michael may be self-absorbed or cowardly. The productivity theater account aims to describe a mechanism in which vices may be engines; not every closed-minded individual is engaging in moral productivity theater and not all individuals evading moral understanding through theater exhibit clear-cut cases of moral or epistemic vice, but vices may be operative in the performance of moral productivity theater. Second, relatedly, a vice account fails to capture instances of evading moral insight that result not from vice but from structures (such as inherited models of moral inquiry), the subconscious, and qualities with a virtue valence (such as steadfastness and open-mindedness). This line of thought is really multiple lines in one; the vice account is insufficient to capture a range of cases in which people avoid moral insight by engaging in thought and speech that resembles the pursuit of moral insight. In at least some of these cases, the moral agent is not morally blameworthy as they would be under a vice model.

Finally, if someone is thinking about moral questions with sincerity and effort, how can they be on the hook for moral evasion? There are a handful of distinctions to make here. First, as I pointed out just above, my account does not require that we find the agents engaged in moral productivity theater blameworthy. Instead, it requires that we find their patterns of thought to be obstructive of moral understanding while retaining some characteristic form of moral thought. We are looking for a model that can distinguish between someone sticking their head in the sand—in which case they might be said to be morally blameworthy—and a case where a person can realistically convey to themselves and others a taking up of moral responsibility. Consider again the analogy to productivity theater in the workforce. There is a difference between the worker who avoids work through behaviors that would not pass muster if known by colleagues and supervisors and

the worker who day-in and day-out spends the day doing work that amounts to busywork but nonetheless passes muster at first glance. In the latter case, the so-called “busywork” may be incentivized or learned by the work environment, just as the kind of moral “busywork” may be.

Second, it is still important to recognize the way that modes of moral productivity theater are not necessarily motivationally innocent. As the earlier analysis demonstrates, neurosis and convention, as modes of moral productivity theater, function as consolations and insulation from the demands that moral understanding makes on the individual. The law and custom can console by a sense of completeness and belonging; examination of oneself consoles by centrality, keeping the self the most important object in view; and even self-accusation can console, as Murdoch notes in listing among the consolations of religion, “an invigorating sense of guilt combined with a countermanding experience of innocence” (Murdoch, 1993, p. 81). The preservation of these patterns of thought under conditions of stress is perhaps the least innocent. There are moments in any life when some experience breaks the model’s grip: a person fails to fit a pre-set category, or self-examination turns up something that cannot be processed into the ongoing drama. Motivated avoidance shows itself in what the agent does at these junctures, whether they reach again for the convention, forcing it to fit, or double down on the neurosis. The motivation is not a discrete act of falsification but a standing preference for the model over whatever threatens it.

8 Conclusion

Moral understanding is not cheap, even if the act of attention is available to all. The Murdochian conception of moral understanding emphasizes “the inexhaustible detail of the world, the endlessness of the task of understanding, the importance of not assuming that one has got individuals and situations ‘taped’, the connection of knowledge with love and of spiritual insight with apprehension of the unique” (1956, p. 46). To pursue understanding, there is value in recognizing that it is often something we don’t yet have and sometimes a thing that we will never have.

It is not paradoxical to suggest that the pursuit of understanding originates in incomplete understanding. We might ask, “But is a blurred concept a concept at all?” (Wittgenstein, *PI* §71). Wittgenstein retorts, “Is a photograph that is not sharp a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace a picture that is not sharp by one that is? Isn’t one that isn’t sharp often just what we need?” (*PI* §71). Blurriness, thought of as indeterminacy and incomplete understanding, is what spurs us to *work* at understanding.

The moral productivity theater account demonstrates that we often avoid moral understanding by doing what feels like pursuing it. We take it that the work is here rather

than there and coincidentally the inquiry leads to a sense of having things taped and the picture made crystal clear in ways that, not so coincidentally, exonerate us. And yet, the account here suggests, too, that we, like the laborer whose work is divorced from intrinsic meaning, engage in counterfeit moral cognition because it's the cognition on offer. The real work, the cognition that leads to understanding, may require something altogether more radical than effort of will.

References

- Altorf, H. M. (2018). Talk of lovers in a great hall of reflection: Rereading Iris Murdoch's *The fire and the sun* and *The bell*. *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 51(2), 21-36.
- Anscombe, G. E. M. (1958). Modern moral philosophy. *Philosophy*, 33(124), 1-19.
- Bilgrami, A. (2016). The visibility of value. *Social Research*, 83(4), 917-943.
- Boyd, K. (2020). Moral understanding and cooperative testimony. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 50(1), 18-33.
- Brewer, T. (2009). *The retrieval of ethics*. Oxford University Press.
- Byatt, A. S. (1965). *Degrees of freedom*. Chatto.
- Callahan, L. F. (2018). Moral testimony: A re-conceived understanding explanation. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 68(272), 437-459.
- Crowley, C. (2020). Iris Murdoch and the chime of more than one bell: Ethical imagination and attention to voices. *Études Britanniques Contemporaines*, 59, 1-13.
- Diamond, C. (2010). Murdoch the explorer. *Philosophical Topics*, 38(1), 51-85.
- Foot, P. (1972). Morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives. *The Philosophical Review*, 81(3), 305-316.
- Ghaffary, M. (2019). The event of love and the being of morals: A Deleuzian reading of Iris Murdoch's *The bell*. *Journal of Literary Studies*, 35(2), 105-125.
- Giffin, M. (2007). Framing the human condition: The existential dilemma in Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* and Muriel Spark's *Robinson*. *The Heythrop Journal*, 48(5), 713-741.
- Hashimoto, N. (2001). Dora's growth in *The bell*. *Kawasaki journal of medical welfare*, 7(1), 79-86.
- Hills, A. (2009). Moral testimony and moral epistemology. *Ethics*, 120(1), 94-127.
- Hopkins, R. (2007). What is wrong with moral testimony?. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 74(3), 611-634.
- Howell, R. J. (2014). Google morals, virtue, and the asymmetry of deference. *Noûs*, 48(3), 389-415.
- Kaehele, S., & German, H. (1967). The discovery of reality in Iris Murdoch's *The bell*. *PMLA*, 82(7), 554-563.
- Khalid, F. (2018). *The bell* and *The time of the angels*: The philosophy of love and virtue in Iris Murdoch's ecclesiastical fiction. *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 51(2), 137-156.
- Levenson, M. H. (2001). Iris Murdoch: The philosophic fifties and *The bell*. *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 47(3), 558-579.
- Lovibond, S. (1991). *Realism and imagination in ethics*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Masong, K. (2008). Iris Murdoch's *The bell*: Tragedy, love, and religion. *Kritike*, 2(1), 11-30.
- Millgram, E. (2005). *Ethics done right: Practical reasoning as a foundation for moral theory*. Cambridge University Press.

- Murdoch, I. (1956). Vision and choice in morality. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 30, 32–58.
- Murdoch, I. (1962). *The bell*. Penguin.
- Murdoch, I. (2003). *From a tiny corner in the house of fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* (G. Dooley, Ed.). University of South Carolina Press.
- Murdoch, I. (Murdoch, 1993). *Metaphysics as a guide to morals*. Penguin.
- Murdoch, I. (Murdoch, 1999). *Existentialists and mystics: Writings on philosophy and literature* (P. Conradi, Ed.). Penguin.
- Nickel, P. (2001). Moral testimony and its authority. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 4, 253–266.
- Nicol, B. (2007). The curse of *The bell*: the ethics and aesthetics of narrative. In A. Roew (Ed.), *Iris Murdoch: A reassessment* (pp. 100-111). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Osborn, P. (2014). “Robbed by the youth of me.” The myth of Hyacinth and Apollo in *The Bell*. In M. Luprecht (Ed.), *Iris Murdoch connected: Critical essays on her fiction and philosophy*. The University of Tennessee Press.
- Panizza, S. C. (2022). *The ethics of attention: Engaging the real with Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil*. Routledge.
- Phelps-Roper, M. (2019). *Unfollow: A memoir of loving and leaving the Westboro Baptist Church*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Setiya, K. (2013). Murdoch on the sovereignty of good. *Philosopher's Imprint*, 13(9).
- Sliwa, P. (2017). Moral understanding as knowing right from wrong. *Ethics*, 127(3), 521–552.
- Todd, R. (2019). *Iris Murdoch*. Routledge.
- Wagner–Lawlor, J. (2011). “A particular piece of work”: Love’s labors in Murdoch’s *The Bell*. *Utopian Studies*, 22(1), 2-18.
- Weil, S. (2019). *Gravity and grace*. Routledge.
- Williams, B. (1995). *World, mind, and ethics* (J. E. J. Altham & R. Harrison, Eds.). Cambridge University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2009). *Philosophical investigations* (G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, & J. Schulte, Trans.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Wolf, S. (1982). Moral saints. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 79(8), 419-439.