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Detachment and Attention

Compaijen, J.R.

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10 Detachment and Attention

Rob Compaijen

Introduction

Marilynne Robinson's novel *Lila* begins with the following, tragic scene:

The child was just there on the stoop in the dark, hugging herself against the cold, all cried out and nearly sleeping. She couldn't holler anymore and they didn't hear her anyway, or they might and that would make things worse. Somebody had shouted, Shut that thing up or I'll do it! and then a woman grabbed her out from under the table by her arm and pushed her out onto the stoop and shut the door and the cats went under the house. . . . She was afraid to be under the house, and afraid to be up on the stoop, but if she stayed by the door it might open. There was a moon staring straight at her, and there were sounds in the woods, but she was nearly sleeping when Doll came up the path and found her like that, miserable as could be, and took her up in her arms and wrapped her into her shawl, and said, 'Well, we got no place to go. Where we gonna go?'

It is difficult not to experience the way this girl is treated as appalling. We are strongly inclined to feel sorry for her, and for the fact that she has to grow up in such a violent and neglecting household. Although we barely know her, we feel she deserves better and should be taken good care of. Doll, the help of the family, feels the same way, and we are moved by her loving care, and the warmth expressed by the act of wrapping the girl into her shawl.

Perceiving and experiencing this scene in such an evaluative way is a most natural thing to do. We incurably experience the world we live in as containing values. We see persons as spineless or courageous, situations as deplorable or acceptable, actions as praiseworthy or disgusting, works of art as uninteresting or beautiful, and so forth. However, despite these pervasive experiences of value as pertaining to (objects in) the world, we encounter in our culture a narrative of disenchantment that boldly claims that the world is an empty place. The world, on this view, does

not contain values, and any experience of value as pertaining to (objects in) the world is simply an illusion.

In this chapter, I will critically engage with this disenchantment narrative and explore the possibility of reenchantment. First, I will argue that we should understand the experience of disenchantment as resulting from detachment; that is, from the reflective process of moving away from our present point of view. Through natural science we have come to learn a point of view that is radically detached: it embodies a point of view that is radically outside of the realm of human experience. I will show that this entails the phenomenon of disenchantment, because we realize that the world of meaning and value is not mirrored in the picture of the world that is provided by this strongly detached point of view. In the second part I will argue that we should conceive of reenchantment in terms of perceiving the world from a point of view I describe as ‘detached engagement’. I will discuss attention, as understood by Iris Murdoch, as an illustration of this point of view. Attention, I aim to show, involves a reenchantment of the world not in the sense that it repopulates the world with strange entities, but in the sense that it reveals what was there all along but was removed from sight under the influence of the radically detached point of view.

Disenchantment

Belgian philosopher Arnold Burms has described disenchantment as the experience that tells us that the world of human value and meaning is not mirrored in the picture of the world that the sciences provide us with.² When we experience the world as disenchanted, Burms observes, “[i]t seems as if the world is provocatively uninterested in what is most dear to us.”³ On a fundamental level, disenchantment refers to a “discrepancy between objective facts and subjective experience”.⁴ In this section I explore this idea. More particularly, I will explore the idea that disenchantment is primarily an experience that results from looking at the world from a strongly objective point of view. Understanding disenchantment in this way challenges what might be called an ontological conception of disenchantment. Disenchantment, that is, is frequently understood as a process that results from coming to see what the world really is like. ‘Under the spell of premodern superstitions’, so this story goes, ‘we believed that there are gods and spirits, that things have meaning, that the world contains values – but, given what the natural sciences tell us about the world, we now know that none of that is actually the case.’ The idea that the world does not contain values is presented, in other words, as an ontological discovery. The idea I explore in this section, however, is that, underlying this ontological narrative, there is an *experience* that the world is an ‘empty’, disenchanted place, and that, as I point out below, this experience is induced by looking at the world from

a strongly objective point of view. In the section ‘Detached Engagement’, I extend my treatment of these issues by reflecting on the ideas of engaged and detached points of view, and by providing an analysis of a point of view that I describe as ‘detached engagement’.

Detachment and Disenchantment

It is one of the remarkable features of our existence as human beings that we are not fully immersed in our experience of ourselves and of the world. I do not mean that we are never captivated by the objects of our attention; it is clear that we sometimes are. What I mean is that we are not held captive by them. As reflective creatures, we are able to take a step back, move away from the immediacy of our experiences of the world and of ourselves, and look at them, as it were, from the outside. This reflective process of transcending our present point of view is what I will refer to as ‘detachment’.

Describing detachment in terms of ‘transcending’ naturally invokes the image of a ‘vertical’ movement. It suggests, in effect, that detachment signifies an *increase in objectivity*: it paints the picture of gradually moving away from the parochial character of my present point of view. Thomas Nagel elaborates this point in *The View From Nowhere*, where he writes that “[a] view or form of thought is more objective than another if it relies less on the specifics of the individual’s makeup and position in the world, or on the character of the particular type of creature he is.”⁵ Detachment, so understood, involves a movement away from the particularity of my point of view and it has as its limit a maximally detached view from nowhere – a point of view that has been described as a God’s-eye view, an Archimedean point, the point of view of the universe, and so forth. Detachment, then, is a matter of degree, as are subjectivity and objectivity: “A standpoint that is objective by comparison with the personal view of one individual may be subjective by comparison with a theoretical standpoint still farther out. The standpoint of morality is more objective than that of private life, but less objective than the standpoint of physics.”⁶

I will be focusing on this ‘vertical’ conception of detachment, because the experience of disenchantment seems intimately related to it. However, it is important to note that there are also other, ‘horizontal’ ways of transcending our present point of view.⁷ Think, for instance, of when one looks at oneself after a fight with one’s partner through his or her eyes, or when we converse with someone brought up in a radically different cultural background. Unlike a strongly objective point of view, these external perspectives on ourselves are themselves characterized by a high degree of particularity: they reflect a person’s or culture’s ‘rich’ (normative) ideas about the world.

I have described detachment as the reflective process of transcending our present point of view. I have also noted that our points of view can be detached to a greater or lesser degree. Taken together, this means that we are involved in detachment every time we transcend or move away from our present point of view by adopting a point of view that is more objective. Using Nagel's examples, moving from the personal view of one individual to the moral point of view seems a genuine example of detachment (e.g., one detaches oneself from one's preoccupation with having one's personal preferences satisfied), as is the further step of moving from the moral point of view to the point of view of physics (e.g., one detaches oneself from viewing the world in evaluative terms).

Now, crucially, the pursuit of objectivity that is central to this account of detachment can, if taken far enough, result in the idea that value is an illusion. This is a line of thought developed by Nagel in *The View From Nowhere*, where he writes that "[i]t can seem, when one looks at life from outside, that there is no room for values in the world at all" and that "[v]alues can seem really to disappear when we step outside of our skins, so that it strikes us as a philosophical *perception* that they are illusory."⁸ Elaborating these ideas, he describes this process in more detail as follows:

The pursuit of objectivity with respect to value runs the risk of leaving value behind altogether. We may reach a standpoint so removed from the perspective of human life that all we can do is to observe: nothing seems to have value of the kind it appears to have from inside, and all we can see is human desires, human striving – human *valuing*, as an activity or condition. . . . [I]f we continue along the path that leads from personal inclination to objective values and ethics, we may fall into nihilism.⁹

Nagel argues that if we adopt a point of view that is radically objective, value itself seems an illusion.¹⁰ The more general idea explicated in these passages seems to be that value becomes increasingly difficult to discern with each further step in detachment: the further we move away from the 'internal' point of view of some activity or practice (including the practice of human life), the more difficult it becomes to perceive its value. Importantly, there comes a point in this process of detachment where all value has become invisible. To put it in terms of the topics of this chapter: at this stage of detachment, we will experience the world as *disenchanted*. Our powerful and pervasive experiences of value are not mirrored in the world that is presented to us when we look at it from a point of view that is radically external or radically objective.

There are many everyday situations that seem to confirm the idea that value becomes invisible when we look at some activity or practice

from an external point of view. We are all familiar, I think, with situations in which the value or meaning of an activity or project that we genuinely care about seems to have evaporated when, for one reason or another, we are forced to look at them from the outside. This is, at least, what I experience on a regular basis when talking about, for example, academic philosophy with those who do not care too much for it: the sense of urgency and value I experience academic philosophy to have when I am ‘practicing’ it, seem to disappear quite easily when, in a conversation with ‘outsiders’, I myself am forced to look at it from the outside.

On a large scale, Nagel’s analysis is confirmed by the natural sciences. (The point of view of the natural sciences is, undoubtedly, part of what Nagel is thinking about in the above passages.) The natural sciences embody a thoroughly objective point of view that is radically outside of our ordinary (value-laden) experience of the world, and it is in virtue of the objective nature of its point of view that it is unable to perceive value in the world. Let us look at an example. Gilbert Harman asks us to imagine a situation in which you see a couple of children trying to burn a cat alive.¹¹ Unless one is a psychopath one will experience this scene as cruel and straightforwardly evil. Now, from the point of view of the natural sciences we can describe the situation at hand in different ways (in terms of the temperature of the flames, in terms of changing chemical structures in the cat, or in terms of the frequency of the cat’s screams), but we will not be able to describe it as cruel or evil. Natural science, Akeel Bilgrami writes while discussing this example, “studies combustion and condensation, but not value properties, not things described in value terms such as cruelty and threats”.¹²

Nagel, then, seems right to argue that adopting a strongly objective point of view makes it impossible to discern value. He clarifies this phenomenon by referring to internal and external points of view, and I have followed him in this. Yet, it seems possible to shed a bit more light on it by understanding the perception of value (and meaning) to require our points of view to be *engaged*, whereas value (and meaning) becomes invisible when our points of view are *detached*. At a conceptual level it is not easy to be precise here. Generally speaking, we can describe an engaged point of view in terms of being involved, emotionally invested, committed, and so forth, while the opposite holds for a detached point of view. In the next section I will explore the idea of engaged and detached points of view, and how they relate to the perception of value, in more detail.

For now it is important to see that the experience of disenchantment indeed seems to be induced by looking at the world from a strongly objective point of view. The cruelty of putting a three-year-old out on the stoop, in the dark and cold; the moving compassion of someone picking her up and wrapping her in a shawl; the admirability of people who take

loving care of their of terminally ill partners; the horror of rape – it all dissipates when we adopt a strongly objective point of view towards the world, as is done in the natural sciences. I do not think it is farfetched to say that privileging the importance of such a point of view towards the world, as seems to be done in our culture from modernity onwards, can give birth to a narrative of disenchantment that declares the world to be devoid of value and meaning.

Detached Engagement

If one argues that adopting a strongly objective point of view makes value invisible, one suggests that value becomes increasingly difficult to discern with each further step in detachment. This might seem rather obvious. If the perception of value is related to looking at the world from a relatively internal, engaged point of view, it seems clear that with each step away from such a point of view, value becomes more difficult to perceive. However, in this section I will point to an interesting phenomenon that challenges this picture. The phenomenon I want to draw attention to is that a slightly detached point of view – one that I will describe as ‘detached engagement’ – is capable of actually *increasing* our discernment of value. (This will then be important for my account of reenchantment in the second section of this chapter.) To be able to do that, however, we first need to have a closer look on what it means to say that a point of view is engaged or detached.

I have described an engaged point of view in terms of an internal point of view that is involved, emotionally invested, committed, and so forth. I think we can make this more specific by understanding that, *in engagement, we allow ourselves to be moved*.¹³ This is, I confess, an ambiguous phrase, but the ambiguity involved in this understanding of engagement is important. As I see it, the phrase contains two ideas. The *first* is that, when our point of view is engaged, *we are open to aspects or properties of the world that motivate us to perform some action*. This is, if I am not mistaken, the view brought forward by Bilgrami. Contrasting the engaged and detached point of view, he writes:

[S]omeone may go to Calcutta and view another person’s condition in detached terms of average daily caloric counts but then may also perceive that that person is in need. When he perceives the world from a perspective that describes it in value terms of this sort – needs – he will be prompted to practical agency – to give money to Oxfam, say.¹⁴

Viewing the world from an engaged point of view allows us to discern values that motivate us to act in this or that way.¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, Bilgrami describes the engaged point of view as the point of view of practical

agency. A detached point of view, by contrast, is the point of view of observation.¹⁶ It paradigmatically belongs to the (natural) sciences:

In many of our ordinary observations we think of the world in a detached way quite informally (“That’s a square table,” “Here’s the tree in the quad,” “The water in the lake is cold,” “She is going to class”), but when we do natural science, that detached perspective takes its most regimented form, and we predict and explain the objects, properties, and events in the world, bringing them under laws and generalizations, moving to a vocabulary of molecules, chlorophyll, H₂O, neurons, etc.¹⁷

When we relate to the world in a detached spirit, one is standing back from it, observing it in such a way that we are not moved to action. Now, of course, someone who views a person’s condition in terms of average daily caloric count can be motivated to act, just as someone who discovers, through a detached analysis of its chemical structure, that the tap water in a restaurant is poisoned. The important point here is to see that, if they are so moved to action, they have, at that moment, left the detached point of view behind and have adopted an engaged point of view. On Bilgrami’s view, that is, the engaged point of view of practical agency and the detached point of view of observation crowd each other out. There is, as he puts it, a “failure of fit between the two points of view.”¹⁸

Although this is an important part of what is involved in engagement, it is not the whole story. This brings me to the *second* aspect of the idea that, in engagement, we allow ourselves to be moved. Viewing the world from an engaged point of view might make us respond to what we discern in ways that cannot be understood as actions in a proper sense. That is, the perception of value *moves us to certain emotional responses*.

A phenomenology of the experience of value *both* strongly suggests that we should understand engagement in terms of the wider idea of allowing ourselves to be moved, *and* challenges the idea that value becomes increasingly difficult to discern with each further step in detachment. I will discuss two kinds of cases. *First*, consider aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is a clear example of engagement in the wider sense of allowing ourselves to be moved. The experience of aesthetic values such as beauty or the sublime typically does not move us to practical agency. That is, an experience of the sublime in nature, or the experience of beauty in a work of art, is not typically an experience that involves a demand to *act*. This accords, I think, with a fundamental passivity that is involved in aesthetic experience – we tend to experience the beautiful as something that pulls us towards it, and the sublime as something that overtakes us. (I take it that this is part of what Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer are getting at when they understand aesthetic experience

in terms of ‘disinterestedness’.) But although aesthetic experience is not engaged in the sense that it moves us to act, it is engaged in the sense that it can be deeply moving. In aesthetic experience we are moved to emotional responses: admiration, wonder, awe, but also irritation, uncanniness, disgust, and so forth. The point of view we inhabit in aesthetic experience, then, seems a genuine example of engagement.

At the same time, however, there is a sense in which the aesthetic point of view is detached as well. In the experience of beauty or the sublime, we are lifted above our daily routines; our practical, active way of relating to the world. I think we should say that, in aesthetic experience, one is an observer – not a detached, but a deeply *engaged observer*. And it seems to me that, precisely *because* this is a point of view that has transcended our immersion in our everyday, practical ways of relating to the world, it involves an increased capacity to discern aesthetic value. I myself at least experience it this way: I am much more open to, for example, the beauty of the surrounding (natural) world when I am not occupied by work, deadlines, the immediate care for my children, and so forth.

We stumble upon a fascinating phenomenon: there is a point of view that is both deeply engaged and qualifies as detached. I will describe it, paradoxically, as ‘detached engagement’. Viewing the world from the point of view of such detached engagement, is also what happens in situations that are ethically salient and, in a sense, much more ordinary. Celebrating my birthday with friends and family, I have found myself standing in the kitchen, watching my guests have animated conversations. At these moments, I feel, to put it rather paradoxically, absent and present, an observer and participant, at the same time. Standing there, observing what is taking place before my eyes, I feel grateful – not only for the fact that these people are a part of my life, but also, more basically, for the sheer fact that something wonderful is taking place. Similarly, sometimes I perceive my wife and children in a slightly detached way, from a standpoint that is no longer immersed in the familiar patterns of everyday family life. At such moments, I see them no longer as the persons I know so well and share a life with, but as – to put it paradoxically again – familiar strangers; and this leads, interestingly, to an intensification of love, gratitude, and compassion.^{19, 20}

To summarize: in the above analysis, I have done two things. *First*, I have provided a substantial understanding of what it means to relate to the world in a spirit of engagement. An engaged point of view is not exclusively tied to practical agency. Engagement, I have argued, means allowing oneself to be moved, and while that includes practical agency, it also means being moved to respond emotionally to (aspects of) the world. *Second*, I have challenged the idea that detachment makes value increasingly difficult to discern. Although it is true, as we have seen in section 1.1, that adopting a strongly detached, objective point of view makes value invisible, there are instances of detachment – leading to a

point of view I have referred to as ‘detached engagement’ – that do not decrease but *increase* our capacity to discern value. (This is a topic I will return to in the next section.) Nagel, in his important account of these matters, seems insufficiently aware of this phenomenon. It also challenges Bilgrami’s claim that there is a failure of fit between an engaged and detached point of view.²¹ In the next section I will discuss Murdoch’s views on attention as an illustration of detached engagement, and show that that provides us with a meaningful understanding of what re-enchancement can be.

Attention and Reenchantment

‘Reenchantment’ is a rather bewildering notion. It suggests a process of repopulating the world with entities that, for one reason or another, are no longer present. Yet, what could that possibly mean? Instead, I think we should understand reenchantment in terms of *perceiving what was there all along but was removed from sight*. In this section I will develop the view that we should understand reenchantment in terms of attention, and that attention, as a ‘detached-engaged’ way of relating to the world, provides us with a clear view of value.

Why, it might be asked, should we understand reenchantment with reference to a ‘detached-engaged’ point of view? Why isn’t it enough to simply return to the engaged point of view? After all, the perception of value is dependent on relating to the world in a spirit of engagement. In our everyday, engaged way of relating to the world we regard a situation at work deplorable, we view a decision our partner has made as courageous, we are appalled by the cruelty of some act of violence we hear about, and so forth. Adopting the everyday, engaged point of view seems a proper example of perceiving what was there all along but was removed from sight under the influence of the strongly detached point of view embodied by the natural sciences.

Such a strategy seems to be advocated by, for instance, John McDowell when he writes about curing what he calls ‘vertigo’. He points out that we might experience a profound anxiety (‘vertigo’) when we adopt a standpoint outside of our immersion in human practices (‘the whirl of organism’) and come to believe that what we are doing and experiencing is an illusion:

We cannot be whole-heartedly engaged in the relevant parts of the ‘whirl of organism,’ and at the same time achieve the detachment necessary in order to query whether our unreflective view of what we are doing is illusory. The cure for the vertigo, then, is to give up the idea that philosophical thought, about the sorts of practice in question, should be undertaken at some external standpoint, outside our immersion in our familiar forms of life.²²

All that we have to do, on this line of thought, is to abandon the error we have made in supposing that we should approach the issue of value in a strongly detached way. However, I think that we should say and do more, and understanding why will explain the importance of a detached-engaged point of view for a viable meaning of reenchantment.

The problem, as I see it, is this: reenchantment cannot unqualifiedly be understood in terms of readopting the everyday, engaged standpoint, because that standpoint itself runs the risk of obscuring our perception of value. Developing a line of thought that I touched upon earlier in my account of detached engagement, I think there are modes of engagement that run the risk of making value invisible. We can be ‘entrenched’ in the mood we are in, in the life we lead, in the practices and projects we engage in. Think, for example, of when we are invested in our jobs or careers or projects to a degree that we do not notice that our loved ones are not doing well. Or think of when we are immersed in our ‘inner life’ because we are worried and now neglect the responsibilities we face in our lives. In situations such as these, one is so ‘absorbed’ that one, interestingly, jeopardizes one’s capacity to be moved (i.e., one’s engagement). The invisibility of value that I am gesturing at here is, to be sure, of a different nature than the principled invisibility of value that is fundamental to the strongly detached point of view. Value is in principle accessible here, but threatens to become invisible due to the specific way in which our relation to the world is engaged. Elaborating this line of thought, Murdoch writes that “we may fail to see the individual because we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own into which we try to draw things from outside, not grasping their reality and independence, making them into dream objects of our own.”²³

Murdoch’s insistence on the vital importance of attention – a notion she “borrow[s] from Simone Weil”²⁴ – for (moral) life grows out of this concern. She describes attention as “a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one’s eyes but of a certainly perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline.”²⁵ From this description I take four features of attention that I will explore in what follows: attention as perception of the particular (it discerns ‘what confronts on’); attention as moral perception (it is loving, ‘patient and just’); attention as accurate perception (it presents us with ‘what is really the case’); and attention as something that we do not possess immediately, but that results from ‘moral discipline’.

First, attention, Murdoch stresses, is a matter of perceiving the particular. It is “directed upon an individual reality.”²⁶ In one sense, of course, all perception is directed upon individual realities. We do not see universals. We do not see oak trees, but *these particular* oak trees; we do not see barn owls, but *these particular* barn owls; we do not see human beings, but *these particular* human beings. Yet, in another sense, we often do see

such universals. For all sorts of reasons, we tend to reduce the individual realities we encounter to the more general categories we believe they represent. The idea of ‘attention’ is meant to criticize this reductionist tendency. Properly attending to this particular oak tree, barn owl, or person makes us aware of their peculiarities. (When, in what follows, I speak of attention in terms of perceiving the world, I do not mean, then, that ‘the world’ is the proper object of attention. Its proper objects are individual realities in the world.)

Yet, we should be more specific about the object of attention. Attention not only makes us aware of individual realities, but it reveals to us the value (goodness, beauty) they have or, to put it differently, that resides in them. This is something that Murdoch elaborates in her famous example of a mother-in-law who dislikes her daughter-in-law:

A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D’s accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son married beneath him.²⁷

However, at some point, M decides to look at D again: “M *looks* at D, she attends to D, she focuses her attention.”²⁸ As a result, Murdoch writes, “D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on.”²⁹ Apparently, then, attention is a way of focusing on individual realities in a way that brings out their value. The obvious worry here is that, thus understood, attention involves a kind of wishful thinking, falsifying its object by neglecting or even the bad or the ugly. I will reflect on this worry below, in my discussion of the third aspect of attention.

Second, attention is a *moral* perception of the world. This is already suggested by the prior analysis, because attention was argued to bring out the *value* of individual realities. It does that, however, by having a distinctly moral character. When one is being attentive, on this view, one has “a patient, loving regard, directed upon a person, a thing, a situation”.³⁰ Murdoch characterizes attention in terms of patience, justice, and love. These virtue terms are meant to convey the thought that, in loving attention, the influence of the self in appropriating (the individual realities in) the world is reduced. Murdoch writes: “The same virtues, in the end the same virtue (love), are required throughout, and fantasy (self) can prevent us from seeing a blade of grass just as it can prevent us from seeing another person.”³¹ The main threat to loving attention (and to moral life more generally), according to this line of thought, is the

distorting perspective of the self. Hence, Murdoch's famous remark that "in the moral life the enemy is the fat, relentless ego."³² Attention, on this analysis, enables us to perceive the value of individual realities by being loving, just, patient; that is, by detaching us from the distorting influence of our selves. Yet, what does that mean, exactly?

One of the upshots of viewing ethics as a perceptual discipline, as does Murdoch, is that it makes clear that morality is concerned with much more than with action alone. Describing the self as the enemy of moral life, then, is not simply a way of saying that we should abstain from self-ish action. What Murdoch seems to have in mind by advocating loving attention is much more radical: we should learn to detach ourselves from self-concern and self-absorption. We are often and deeply concerned about ourselves: about our own existence, as well as our own well-being. Murdoch writes, for example, about the "consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy and despair".³³ We can easily add envy, fear of not being recognized, pride, our desire to play a role (an important one) in realizing ideals, and so forth. Such expressions of self-concern distort our perception of the world. Unsurprisingly, then, Murdoch highlights the importance of humility in these matters, claiming that: "The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are."³⁴

It is clear that Murdoch's views are grounded in a deeply pessimistic moral psychology. She endorses a "a doctrine of original sin" which she takes to be generally Freudian in nature.³⁵ That is, she accepts the view of

the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous and hard for the subject to understand or control. Introspection reveals only the deep tissue of ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings.³⁶

We do not need to accept this pessimistic moral psychology (I, for one, do not unqualifiedly endorse it) in order to embrace the importance of attention for ethics. The importance of attention, to recall, is that it exemplifies a deeply engaged way of perceiving the world that, at the same time, involves a detachment from the 'entrenchment', 'immersion', or 'absorption' that is so typical of our everyday ways of relating to the world. We do not need to understand that entrenchment, immersion, or absorption solely in terms of self-concern as pictured by Murdoch in order to see her views on attention as valuable.

This relates to a further point. The above analysis suggests that Murdoch understands self-concern as the sole threat to moral life. But should we not say that there are other threats as well? We could think of, for example, the absorption that is characteristic of our everyday lives, but

also of indifference, unjust political structures, and the skeptical denial of values.³⁷ It seems that Murdoch either has to reinterpret such threats in terms of self-concern (which will yield, I suppose, some unpersuasive interpretations), or has to broaden the scope of potential threats. Yet, however this may be, I think it *is* clear that self-concern poses a fundamental threat to moral life.

If self-absorption and self-concern are the key causes of distortions of the ethical point of view, then we can easily imagine an argument to the conclusion that what we need is a completely disinterested, detached point of view. However, Murdoch argues that, instead, we need loving attention, which has a distinctly engaged character. Now, she claims – and this is the *third* feature of attention that I want to highlight – that loving attention presents us with ‘things as they are’. This is, without a doubt, the most controversial aspect of her account of attention. The controversy resides in two ideas. In the first place, returning to the worry expressed above, if loving attention allows us to perceive the value residing in individual realities – even in individual realities that we are, at first, strongly inclined to dislike or disapprove of – are we then not involved in a kind of wishful thinking? Moreover, and more generally, can we really accept the suggestion that a deeply *engaged* and *ethical* point of view provides us with an undistorted picture of the world? This is an idea that we will quite certainly feel hesitant about; and if we do, that gives witness to the influence and the force of the idea that only a strongly detached point of view has a chance of presenting us with the world as it really is.

In Murdoch’s account both these worries ultimately seem to be misplaced. If, that is, the core problem is that we have a strong tendency to see the world “through lenses distorted by the needs and wishes of our fearful, insecure, and greedy selves”,³⁸ then loving attention – as a point of view in which we have detached ourselves from self-concern and self-absorption – provides us with an undistorted view of the world. This also implies that loving attention is not a kind of wishful thinking, because the primary reason why – if we relate to the world in an engaged way – we do not discern value in (the individual realities in) the world is that our self-concern and self-absorption makes it invisible or turns it into a kind of vice. It is the mother-in-law’s stingy self-concern, on this view, that makes her see her daughter-in-law’s character as ‘vulgar’ while a truthful, attentive perception shows it to be, in fact, ‘refreshingly simple’.

There remains, of course, something problematic about Murdoch’s insistence on loving attention as providing access to ‘things as they are’. There is the general question of whether we can ever claim to have access to things as they are. There is also the question of how this relates to scientific attempts to understand the world. But perhaps it is possible to retain the force of Murdoch’s analysis while leaving behind her concern of having access to things as they are. All that is required to do that,

it seems to me, is to accept that it is possible to increase our discernment of value. And I believe that our everyday experience of discriminating between, for example, virtuous literary critics and ordinary readers, between moral exemplars and ordinary moral agents, and so forth, gives witness to that possibility.

This relates to the *fourth* feature of attention. Loving attention is not something we possess immediately – by nature, as it were – but results from what Murdoch describes as ‘moral discipline’. Loving attention results from a process of gradual formation. How should we understand this formative process? We have already seen that it involves the gradual detachment from self-concern and self-absorption. Yet, how does that work, exactly? Again, an adequate answer to this question takes up more space than I have here. Let me therefore focus on one key element emphasized by Murdoch: aesthetic experience. She writes:

It is important too that great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self. This exercise of *detachment* is difficult and valuable whether the thing contemplated is a human being or the root of a tree or the vibration of a colour or a sound. Unsentimental contemplation of nature exhibits the same quality of detachment: selfish concerns vanish, nothing exists except the things which are seen. Beauty is that which attracts this particular sort of unselfish attention.³⁹

The experience of beauty in nature and in great art has a key function in the cultivation of loving attention, because it teaches us what it means to detach from self-concern and self-absorption. In a famous passage, Murdoch illustrates these ideas as follows:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. And of course this is something which we may also do deliberately: give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care.⁴⁰

While there seems to be a kind of natural fit between attention and beauty (the perception of beauty is typically captivating), the last sentence suggests that the cultivation of loving attention is something that we ourselves might actively shape. We can deliberately detach from our self-concern and self-absorption by turning the attention we already possess towards beauty in nature and art.

These reflections on Murdoch's views provide us with an understanding of loving attention. They suggest that such attention is a proper way of conceiving of reenchantment, which, I claimed, we should understand as discerning what was there all along but removed from sight under the influence of the strongly objective point of view.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to improve our understanding of disenchantment and reenchantment. To do that, I have adopted what could be called a 'perspectival' approach to these issues. That is, I have tried to show that the conception of the world as a disenchanted place implies a particular point of view: one that is strongly detached and has radically abstracted itself from our engaged ways of relating to the world. As such, it is unable to perceive value. In the course of this discussion, I drew attention to the interesting phenomenon of what I described as 'detached engagement' – a point of view that, although it qualifies as detached, actually increases our susceptibility to value.

In the second part, I argued that we should not understand reenchantment in terms of repopulating the world with suspect entities (such as values) but as perceiving what was there all along but was removed from sight under the influence of the strongly objective point of view. I pointed out that we should understand attention as conceived by Iris Murdoch as an example of such reenchantment. Attention – a loving, selfless perception of individual realities in the world – steers clear both from the radical detachment that makes value invisible, and from the self-concerned and self-absorbed engagement that jeopardizes our perception of value as well. As such, it is a pivotal illustration of detached engagement.⁴¹

Notes

1. Marilynne Robinson, *Lila* (London: Virago Press, 2014), 3–4.
2. Arnold Burms, *Waarheid, Evocatie, Symbool* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 10.
3. Arnold Burms, "Disenchantment", *Ethical Perspectives* 1, no. 1 (1994): 145.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 5.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Cf. Fred D'Agostino, "Transcendence and Conversation: Two Conceptions of Objectivity", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (1993): 87–108.
8. Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, 5.
9. *Ibid.*, 209.
10. There is debate among philosophers and scientists about the plausibility of 'the value-free ideal' of science. See for an important book in this regard: Heather E. Douglas, *Science, Policy, and the Value-Free Ideal* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

11. G. Harman, *The Nature of Morality. An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 4.
12. Akeel Bilgrami, "The Visibility of Value", *Social Research* 83, no. 4 (2016): 918.
13. 'Allow' is not meant to convey the thought that engagement is always, or even typically, the result of a conscious decision. Our ordinary, everyday relations to the world are generally of an engaged nature, and only in exceptional cases do we *choose* to view the world from an engaged point of view.
14. Bilgrami, "The Visibility of Value", 925.
15. Understanding our actions along the lines of the perception of value suggests an interesting – and (for many no doubt) controversial – picture of practical agency. Our actions, and, more fundamentally, our desires, should be thought of as "responses to value properties in the world" (Bilgrami, "The Visibility of Value", 927. Original quotation in italics.). That is, "our agency consists in the fact that these . . . values in the world make normative demands on us that trigger our desires upon which we act" (Bilgrami, "The Visibility of Value", 927). Desires, then, should not be understood as "self-standing" but, instead, should be understood as responses to desirabilities or values in the world (Bilgrami, "The Visibility of Value," 927).
16. Akeel Bilgrami, "The Wider Significance of Naturalism. A Genealogical Essay," in *Naturalism and Normativity*, eds. Mario De Caro and David MacArthur (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 25. Responding to the idea that being an observer is, of course, itself a form of agency (e.g., one observes, explains, predicts), Bilgrami, in a more recent paper, writes that a detached point of view belongs to *theoretical agency*, whereas an engaged point of view belongs to *practical agency* (Bilgrami, "The Visibility of Value", 923).
17. Bilgrami, "The Visibility of Value", 924.
18. Akeel Bilgrami, "What Is Enchantment?" in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 161.
19. Burms draws attention to phenomena or experiences that seem very similar, but he interprets them in a way that is importantly different from my own account. Referring to Albert Einstein, he writes that "the realization that all scientific knowledge is ultimately insignificant did not make the drive for knowledge worthless in his eyes, but gave that drive its specific intensity" (Burms, "Disenchantment", 155). Another example he gives is "the recognition that one has no image at all of the adult that one's own little son or daughter will become gives one's love for them a special sort of intensity and poignancy" (Burms, "Disenchantment," 156). It seems that he explains such cases of intensified attachment by reference to the alienation that results from looking at the objects of those attachments from an external, detached point of view. I am not sure I understand how this works as an explanation. However, it is important to see that Burms does not say (and does not seem to *want* to say), as I do, that the intensification of our attachments is dependent on an improved discernment of the value or meaning that pertains to the objects of our attachments.
20. Other examples can be given. I am thinking, for instance, of astronauts who, when viewing the earth and human life quite literally from the outside, experience a heightened sense of the value of there being a planet that sustains human life. Apparently, this has been termed the 'overview effect' and has been studied by psychologists. See: Frank White, *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution* (Reston: American Institute of

Aeronautics and Astronautics, 2014 [1987]). I want to thank Alfred Archer for drawing my attention to this notion.

21. In his contribution in the present volume (Chapter 3), Bilgrami develops an interesting line of thought that seems similar to the point I develop here, but, I believe, ultimately establishes a different conclusion. Here is what Bilgrami writes: “the occasional adoption of a third-person point of view on ourselves may, in fact, enhance our practical agency. Spinoza, for instance, gives the example of how if we inquire in a detached way about our anger on some occasion and understand what prompted it, it may help us to learn to control it in the future – a clear case of enhancing our agency, rather than diminishing it” (Akeel Bilgrami, “Might There Be Secular Enchantment?” in *The Philosophy of Reenchantment*, eds. Michiel Meijer and Herbert DeVriese (London: Routledge, 2020, 62)). He concludes that “[t]he very same thing (the third-person point of view on oneself) which *writ small* enhances agency, *writ large*, destroys it.”

The position I seek to establish differs from these interesting and convincing observations in two ways. *First*, note that the point of view that I characterize as ‘detached engagement’ is about our awareness of value properties in the *world*, whereas what Bilgrami describes here concerns our points of view on *ourselves*. *Second* – and more important – the point of the notion of ‘detached engagement’ is to go beyond a rigid distinction between engaged and detached points of view. What I aim to make plausible is that there are degrees of engagement and detachment, and that, interestingly, some forms of detachment foster an intensification of engagement. What I argue for, in other words, is a change or transformation of the nature of our engaged point of view. Bilgrami’s observations about enhancing practical agency, however, are not about such changes *within our engaged point of view*, but about practical importance of ‘the occasional adoption’ of the detached point of view on oneself. It seems, therefore, that his position does assume a rather rigid distinction between engaged and detached points of view.

22. John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason”, *The Monist* 62, no. 3 (1979): 341.
 23. Iris Murdoch, “The Sublime and the Good”, in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (New York: Penguin, 1999 [1997]), 216. In a different context, Peter Railton makes more or less the same point, writing that “[s]trong and immediate affection may overwhelm one’s ability to see what another person actually needs or deserves” (Peter Railton, “Alienation, Consequentialism, and Morality”, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 13, no. 2 (1984): 146–47).
 24. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 34.
 25. *Ibid.*, 38.
 26. *Ibid.*, 34.
 27. *Ibid.*, 17.
 28. *Ibid.*, 22.
 29. *Ibid.*, 17–18.
 30. *Ibid.*, 40.
 31. *Ibid.*, 70.
 32. *Ibid.*, 52.
 33. *Ibid.*, 91.
 34. *Ibid.*, 103–4.
 35. *Ibid.*, 51.
 36. *Ibid.*
 37. Several authors writing about Murdoch’s ethical thought note that Murdoch seems unaware (or uninterested) in what Martha Nussbaum refers to as “the

- political and social determinants of a moral vision". This quote is taken from a paper by Bridget Clarke who discusses these issues. See: Clarke, "The Prospects for Critical Moral Perception", in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher. A Collection of Essays*, ed. by Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 249. For another paper that critically discusses Murdoch's views in this regard, see: Blum, "Visual Metaphors in Murdoch's Moral Philosophy," in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher. A Collection of Essays*, ed. Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 307–23.
38. Susan Wolf, "Loving Attention", in *Understanding Love. Philosophy, Film, and Fiction*, eds. Susan Wolf and Christopher Grau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 384.
39. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 65.
40. *Ibid.*, 84.
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