Approval

Name: Karen Ravensbergen
Degree: Master of Arts (Liberal Studies)
Title of Thesis: Looking With a Just and Loving Gaze: The Concept of Attention in the Writings of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch

Examining Committee:

Chair: Eleanor Stebner
Associate Professor, Humanities

June Sturrock
Senior Supervisor
Professor Emeritus, Department of English

Stephen Duguid
Supervisor
Professor, Humanities Department

Veronica Gaylie
External Examiner
Professor, Faculty of Education
University of British Columbia

Date Defended/Approved: October 28, 2011
Declaration of
Partial Copyright Licence

The author, whose copyright is declared on the title page of this work, has granted to Simon Fraser University the right to lend this thesis, project or extended essay to users of the Simon Fraser University Library, and to make partial or single copies only for such users or in response to a request from the library of any other university, or other educational institution, on its own behalf or for one of its users.

The author has further granted permission to Simon Fraser University to keep or make a digital copy for use in its circulating collection (currently available to the public at the “Institutional Repository” link of the SFU Library website <www.lib.sfu.ca> at: <http://ir.lib.sfu.ca/ handle/1892/112>) and, without changing the content, to translate the thesis/project or extended essays, if technically possible, to any medium or format for the purpose of preservation of the digital work.

The author has further agreed that permission for multiple copying of this work for scholarly purposes may be granted by either the author or the Dean of Graduate Studies.

It is understood that copying or publication of this work for financial gain shall not be allowed without the author’s written permission.

Permission for public performance, or limited permission for private scholarly use, of any multimedia materials forming part of this work, may have been granted by the author. This information may be found on the separately catalogued multimedia material and in the signed Partial Copyright Licence.

While licensing SFU to permit the above uses, the author retains copyright in the thesis, project or extended essays, including the right to change the work for subsequent purposes, including editing and publishing the work in whole or in part, and licensing other parties, as the author may desire.

The original Partial Copyright Licence attesting to these terms, and signed by this author, may be found in the original bound copy of this work, retained in the Simon Fraser University Archive.

Simon Fraser University Library
Burnaby, BC, Canada
Abstract

The central and unifying concept of this project is attention, which as defined by Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, is a quotidian ethical practice. Both theorists are influenced by Platonic thought, a shared sense of the human condition and a common view of an active relationship between theory and practice. Their writings reflect their unique historical and biographical situations, including Weil’s mysticism and Murdoch’s work as a practicing novelist.

The second part of the project is an active, personal investigation of the practice of attention to both other people and the natural world. Through the lens of my daily bicycle commute, I explore several themes including intrinsic or non-instrumental value, environmental ethics, and the cultivation of a qualitative ethical vocabulary through the practice of attention. I conclude with a brief analysis of Weil and Murdoch’s theory of attention as an ethical and contemporary re-imagining of Platonic thought.

Keywords: attention; Simone Weil; Iris Murdoch; ethics; literature; environmental ethics; cycling
Dedication

I am humbled and moved by the courage and intelligence of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch; two vibrant women who dared articulate their unique and challenging vision of attention as an ethical way of being.

I would like to dedicate my project to my wonderful family and friends. To Mom and Dad, thank you for the foundation of your faith, unfailing support, generosity and love. Thank you too for sharing my excitement about this project and for planting the seeds for my love of the natural world very early in my life – your deep love of nature has always shone through our family. To Auntie Ann, thank you for always sharing your academic passion and for so many fascinating and sustaining conversations. To Wendy, thank you for your amazing positivity, enthusiasm and listening ear - I always feel so supported by you! To Maddie and Max, you are beams of light in my life. And to David, thank you for sharing one of the best experiences of my life with me, one which is inevitably connected with this project – our three week bicycle touring adventure of Europe. It was attention in action!

Special thanks to Katie Brown for many years of sharing a love for ideas and an ongoing conversation that is perpetually clarifying and refreshing – you’ve been such a support. And to the residents of the happy purple house on Salsbury Drive – how sweet it is to love where you live! This home is a nourishing place.

And last, I want to thank Steph and Theo for your daily visits during those intense weeks in July. You both were a ray of sunshine in one of the drabbest Julys I can recall.
Acknowledgements

Special thanks to June Sturrock for creating and leading such an inspiring course on Ethics, Aesthetics and Literature. The readings and discussion in her course catalyzed my learning from all of my GLS courses and led me to choose Attention as the concept for my culminating project.

Thank you to Steve Duguid for sharing his wisdom and knowledge in the area of Nature and Culture. His course has shaped how I see the world and informs many of the ideas in this project.

I am grateful to both June and Steve for holding me to a high standard on this project. I really appreciate the time that each of you was willing to spend with me and for your guidance and patience with my very long process. I feel satisfied with both my topic and the final project, and I know this would not have happened if it weren’t for your flexibility, sense of humour, and willingness to engage in many hours of conversation. Thank you!

Thank you to Wendy Sjolin for her patience and warmth in assisting with all of the administrative tasks associated with this project. Thanks too to Joanie Wolfe for her expertise and availability in assisting with formatting.

Last, I am so thankful that I have been a part of Graduate Liberal Studies at SFU. My time in GLS has nurtured and informed my intellectual curiosity in a lively and diverse community. The broad range of primary texts and topics covered in the courses continue to give depth and breadth to my critical and ethical vocabulary. The GLS program has enriched my life, and I look forward to continuing to contribute what I have learned both professionally in my work as a teacher and as a democratic citizen.
# Table of Contents

Approval.......................................................................................................................... ii  
Abstract.......................................................................................................................... iii  
Dedication......................................................................................................................... iv  
Acknowledgements......................................................................................................... v  
Table of Contents............................................................................................................. vi

## Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1  
Project Overview............................................................................................................. 2  
A Platonic Foundation..................................................................................................... 3

Chapter 1.  
Beginning with Weil........................................................................................................ 7  
Weil and Attention......................................................................................................... 8  
The Role of Action .......................................................................................................... 11  
The Human Condition.................................................................................................... 13  
An Eye for Complexity.................................................................................................... 14  
An Extreme Figure......................................................................................................... 15  
Weil as Christian Mystic................................................................................................. 16

Chapter 2.  
Enter Iris Murdoch.................................................................................................. 19  
The Inextricability of Action......................................................................................... 21  
Murdoch and Complexity.............................................................................................. 22  
Murdoch and the Novel................................................................................................. 24  
The Ethical Turn in Literature....................................................................................... 28  
Paying Attention............................................................................................................. 29

Chapter 3.  
Attention in Action......................................................................................................... 31  
Other People Exist.......................................................................................................... 32  
The High Cost of Attention – November 2010......................................................... 32  
The Issue of Relativism................................................................................................... 37  
Rat Killer II – July 2011................................................................................................. 38

Chapter 4.  
Paying Attention to the Natural World........................................................................ 44  
Beauty in Nature............................................................................................................ 51  
   Living with Reality - July 2011.................................................................................... 52

Conclusion: A Return to Plato......................................................................................... 56  
Closing Thoughts............................................................................................................ 60

Works Cited.................................................................................................................... 61

Appendix.  
One Year Cycle Photos................................................................................................. 65
Introduction

This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth. Only he who is capable of attention can do this. *(The Simone Weil Reader 99)*

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...It is obvious here what is the role, for the artist or spectator, of exactness and good vision: unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention. *(The Sovereignty of Good 64)*

The central and unifying concept of this project is the nature and practice of attention. My definition of attention does not preclude a colloquial understanding of the word, as attention is defined in the OED as “notice taken of someone or something; the regarding of someone or something as interesting or important.” While attention has been the focus of research and study in the fields of psychology, neuroscience and education¹, I wish to explore attention as an ethical orientation and a way of being in the world. Although there are some commonalities with and influences from the Buddhist

---

¹ Research on attention in the fields of psychology, neuroscience and education continues to explore the cognitive and behavioural mechanisms for filtering through and making sense of sensory input, including the brain’s ability to access prior experience and shift focus between competing or simultaneous tasks. Research findings are regularly published in such peer-reviewed journals as The Journal of Cognitive Psychology, Innovations in Clinical Neuroscience and Developmental Psychology.
concept of mindfulness\textsuperscript{2}, I wish to limit this project’s exploration of attention to the ideas theorized by the French philosopher and activist Simone Weil (1909-1943) and the British writer and philosopher Iris Murdoch (1919-1999), who are the principle thinkers associated with this concept. Both philosophers describe the deliberate and focused practice of attention to another as an ethical act – it is to see a “truth” that is neither self-referential nor contingent on the particular circumstances of the individual observer. Weil and Murdoch contend that it is a good thing to pay attention to “reality” – both as an exercise in overcoming human selfishness and as a means to access a timeless and external ideal of Goodness. Attention for these theorists therefore is an ethical practice that is counter to relativism. The ethical attention described by Weil and Murdoch requires the observer to look beyond the particularities of his or her situation to an independent “truth.”

**Project Overview**

I begin my study with an overview of the influence of Plato on both Weil and Murdoch’s descriptions of attention, as a Platonic sense of an absolute and external form of Goodness forms a theoretical foundation for both thinkers. I move on to consider Weil’s concept of attention in light of her personal biography and historical situation. Infused in Weil’s theory of attention is her mysticism, her sense of the human condition and complexity. Next, I turn my exploration to Iris Murdoch’s use and expansion of Weil’s definition of attention. Important considerations include Murdoch’s insistence that attention is both a deliberately-chosen and difficult practice in the service of ethics, as well as her belief in the novel’s potential to be ethically instructive; a point made

\textsuperscript{2} Both Weil and Murdoch demonstrated an interest in the ideas of “Eastern” religions, and surely there is an element of Buddhist influence in their philosophy. In particular, the Buddhist practice of mindfulness overlaps with the type of attention described by Murdoch and Weil. Essentially, the practice of mindfulness involves being attentive to “what is” through meditative practice. The emphasis is on observation of the mind and body, and noticing what one is experiencing in the present moment. For more on the connection between Weil and Buddhism, see her writing published in *Gravity and Grace* pgs. 12-15, 62-71, 97-98 (1947) as well as Rhees pgs. 45-49, 105-126, (2004) and von der Ruhr, pgs. 100 – 119 (2006). For Murdoch and Buddhism see *Existentialists and Mystics* pgs. 221 - 241, 448 - 450 (1997) as well as Widdows, pgs. 90, 92, 98, 100, 139 - 162 (2005) and Rowe, pgs. 30-54 (2007).
particularly poignant by Murdoch’s own work as a practicing novelist. I connect Murdoch’s view of the novel with a wider tradition of ethical criticism in literature; one that seeks a rich, meaningful and accessible ethical vocabulary in the novel. For both Weil and Murdoch, attention is the antidote for a naturally selfish human condition. Attention requires us to re-direct our gaze from self to other, to enlarge the scope of our vision to see Truth, which is a reality that is indifferent to our own selfish concerns. Attention is an intentional, disciplined, ethical practice.

I turn to a personal exploration of the concept of attention in the latter sections of this project. I reflect on my own experiment with deliberately focusing my attention outward on my daily bicycle commute, and talk about the human and non-human others I encounter along the way. This personal investigation of attention is in keeping with both Weil and Murdoch’s theoretical approaches to the topic, as both theorists developed and applied their ideas in practice (Weil through her social activism and Murdoch through her works of fiction). For both theorists, true attention to an other is action, as it unseats the self as the central referent and instead broadens and re-orientes one’s perspective to include the other. I consider the difficulties of what Murdoch calls “unselfing” in opening my mind and heart to the existence of others, and discuss the potential for ethical relativism that may result from an understanding of each individual’s unique experience of existence. I also examine in some detail what it means to look at the non-human other, or nature, with attention. In addition to its potential to counter human selfishness, I suggest that attention to nature may also be seen as a valuable tool in the service of the environmentalist’s project of seeking and naming intrinsic and non-instrumental value in the natural world. I conclude the project by re-visiting the Platonic influence on Weil and Murdoch’s thought, and propose that their use of Platonic concepts is metaphorical and grounded in real world practice.

A Platonic Foundation

The influence of Plato on both Murdoch and Weil’s thought is undeniable. In Cornford’s introduction to Plato’s Republic, he describes Platonic philosophy as centering around two postulates,
the belief in a world of intelligible Forms or ‘Ideas’ existing independently of the things we see and touch, and the belief in an immortal soul existing in separation from the body, both before birth and after death. It is the philosophy of a spirit which turns away from this mortal region to set its hopes on things beyond the reach of time and change. (Cornfield xxvii)

Particularly significant to Weil and Murdoch is Plato’s theory of forms as explored in many of his writings, most famously in *The Republic* through the Allegory of the Cave. This myth describes shackled cave-dwellers who are convinced that the shadows projected onto the cave wall by the light of a fire burning behind them are what is real. Gradually, they come to see that real things (such as themselves and other objects in the cave) cause the shadows, and eventually they ascend above ground and see the sun. They realize that the sun is what is “real” while the shadows are illusion – mimicry of the true light. Murdoch explains, “The sun represents the Form of the Good in whose light the truth is seen; it reveals the world, hitherto invisible, and is also a source of life” (*Existentialists and Mystics* 389). This idea of the Good – a timeless and universal ideal - sets an external standard of perfection. Plato explains,

In the world of knowledge, the last thing to be perceived and only with great difficulty is the essential Form of Goodness. Once it is perceived, the conclusion must follow that, for all things, this is the cause of whatever is right and good; in the visible world it gives birth to light and to the lord of light, while it is itself sovereign in the intelligible world and the parent of intelligence and truth. (Cornford 231)

Thus, the Form of Goodness sets a standard of evaluation – things are good to the degree that they approximate the timeless and universal Form of Goodness.

The sense of ultimate Goodness as an eternal and transcendent ideal informs both Weil and Murdoch’s ideas about the nature of reality. Both thinkers have a sense that our perceptions of reality are skewed by human frailty. It is the “light” of Goodness that enables us to see what is true. To look at another with an attentive gaze is to see truthfully, accurately. It is to overcome the human tendency to see things through the
filter of our own egos, through the lens of our own selfish agendas.\(^3\) Weil declares her Platonic position saying,

> There is a reality outside the world, that is to say, outside space and time, outside man’s mental universe outside any sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties…That reality is the unique source of all the good that can exist in this world: that is to say, all beauty, all truth, all justice, all legitimacy, all order and all human behaviour that is mindful of obligations. (Selected Writings 132)

Similarly, Murdoch says, “What does seem to make perfect sense in the Platonic myth is the idea of the Good as the source of light which reveals to us all things as they really are” (SOG 68). For both Weil and Murdoch, the Form of Goodness is both an ideal to strive to see through the practice of attention as well as a source of illumination – a means to recognize reality, or Truth.

Both Weil and Murdoch take the Platonic forms to the heart of their philosophy, and assert that the practice of attention is the means of perceiving a glimpse of this ideal of Goodness, one that is separate from the self. That which is “good” is an approximation, a reflection of this transcendent ideal. For Weil and Murdoch, attention is the way to access this external referent for goodness. Weil elaborates, saying,

> Just as the reality of this world is the sole foundation of facts, so that other reality is the sole foundation of good…Those minds whose attention and love are turned towards that reality are the sole intermediary through which good can descend from there and come among men. (Selected Writings 132)

For Murdoch as well, ideal Goodness is a timeless Form. It is accessible through the practice of disciplined attention. She describes, “an attention which is not just the planning of particular good actions but an attempt to look right away from self towards a

\(^3\) See later sections of this project for more detailed descriptions of Weil and Murdoch’s assertions about the human condition. In summary, both of their theories rest on the assumption that human nature is self-centered and highly prone to distractions from “reality” – meaning that which is independently “True,” regardless of the interests of the observer.
distant transcendent perfection, a source of uncontaminated energy, a source of new and quite undreamed of virtue” (SOG 99).

For both thinkers then, attention is the practice that leads the gaze outward from the self to an encounter with the transcendent Form of Goodness. It is also the foundation of a moral life. Both Weil and Murdoch build their theories of attention on this Platonic assumption of an external referent for goodness – a timeless and ideal form. A more detailed elaboration of their ideas, in particular the nature and practice of attention, is described in the following pages.
Chapter 1.

Beginning with Weil

It is difficult to separate Simone Weil’s life from her thought, as it expressed her own philosophy so vividly. The hallmarks of her ideas include a deeply-held belief in the necessity for the unity of ideas and action, her concerns with justice and suffering, and of course her technique of “attention” as a means of accessing truth and knowledge.

She was born in Paris in 1909 to an upper middle class Jewish family, and died at age 34 in a state of exhaustion, illness and self-imposed deprivation. From a young age, Simone Weil was extraordinarily intelligent and sensitive to the suffering of others. Her contemporary at the Ecole Normale Superieure, Simone de Beauvoir, described her capacity for empathy and love as possessing “a heart that could beat right across the world” (qtd. in Gray 35 from Beauvoir’s memoir). For example, at the age of six Weil decided to deny herself sugar when she heard about sugar rationing on the western front. By age ten, she participated in a march advocating for worker’s rights and by the time she was twelve, Weil, already fluent in ancient Greek, was denouncing the way that the Treaty of Versailles “humiliated the defeated enemy” (qtd. in Gray 9). Weil believed passionately in consistency between ideas and actions, and in her brief lifetime she strove to express her strongly held political and philosophical beliefs in how she lived her life. She asserted that,

There is no contradiction whatever between this task of theoretical elucidation and the tasks set by the actual struggle; on the contrary, there is correlation, since one cannot act without knowing what one intends and what obstacles have to be overcome. (qtd. from Oppression and Liberty in von der ruhr 61)

A sampling of her activism includes her work as a teacher who gave free lessons to workers after hours, her manual labour, by choice, on a variety of French farms during
harvest time, her voluntary participation with the Republican left on the front lines in the Spanish Civil War, and her work with the Free French in London. In spite of a loving and privileged family, Weil consistently chose a path of difficulty and self-denial. Her choices reflect her passionate belief that ethical ideals ought to be explored in practice, regardless of their impact on one’s own well-being.4

Weil and Attention

Simone Weil first wrote about her concept of attention after a teenaged bout of severe depression. She describes her insight as a sort of revelation,

After months of inward darkness, I suddenly had the everlasting conviction that any human being, even though practically devoid of natural faculties, can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon its attainment. (Waiting for God 64)

4 Weil focused her energies on the plight of the poor and suffering. She did not overtly address the problems associated with being a woman or a Jew and thus traditionally has not been described as a Jewish or feminist thinker. Frost and Metereau describe Weil as “egalitarian in her rejection of group identification” (pg. 22). See footnote 10 for an elaboration on Simone Weil and Judaism. Although Weil declared that she was not a feminist, her gender inevitably played a role in her life. She was raised in a family who joked that she should have been born male and sometimes referred to her as “Simon.” Her parents did not encourage any traditionally feminine qualities or manner of dress in her upbringing, her mother famously declaring that she wanted to raise her daughter “not with the graces of a little girl, but the straightforwardness of a boy, even if she risks the appearance of rudeness” (Fiori 24). Weil demanded the same standards be applied to her as to men in regards to manual labour. She was also the only woman in her class at the Ecole Normale in 1928, until she was joined by Simone de Beauvoir in 1929. Feminist themes and ideas in Weil’s body of work continue to be investigated by writers including Michele Cliff, Cynthia Gayman, Sarah Pinnock and playwright Megan Terry. Andrea Nye’s approach is especially helpful: “It may be possible to trace other lines of thought, not protests against male bias, not the passionate complaints of victims of injustice, but a continuing meditation by women on the human condition that develops positive concepts, arguments, and ways of knowing to inform women’s and men’s ways in the world. In order to recover such a line of thought it may be necessary to abandon the requirement that texts of interest to feminists must deal primarily with gender. It may be necessary to give up the hope that if sexism can somehow be eliminated there will be no more conflict...But the conflicts were not invented by men. They are an effect of the human condition, female and male: we are physical and moral creatures; painful labour is necessary for survival; human nature is individual and social; physical causation rules the natural world at the same time as there are values that transcend material life. At these radical points of contradiction women’s thought might be valuable (Nye xvi).” Indeed Nye’s inclusive embrace of paradox and the importance of women’s thinking on topics that are not explicitly gender-related is equally apt in describing the work of Iris Murdoch.
For Weil, the focused concentration of attention is a supremely difficult and elusive practice. It involves overcoming one’s own natural proclivities for self-centeredness and distraction (a theme I shall return to). She says,

Every time that a human being succeeds in making an effort of attention with the sole idea of increasing his grasp of truth, he acquires a greater aptitude for grasping it, even if his effort produces no visible fruit. (Waiting for God 107)

Thus for Weil, the effort of focusing one’s attention beyond one’s self requires cultivation through patience and practice. It is the re-direction of the gaze that is so crucial. Weil describes this as an “opening up to the reality of strangers, friends, the natural world” (Simone Weil Reader 27). She goes on to describe that it is a way to see Truth “when we pay attention to others, putting aside our own interests and projections and let them reveal themselves to us” (ibid). To look with attention is to look beyond our selves.

This definition of attention is the foundation of what Weil sees as the purpose of study. She calls the cultivation of attention “the real object and almost the sole interest of studies” (Waiting for God 66). She explains,

The authentic and pure values – truth, beauty and goodness – in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object. Teaching should have no aim but to prepare, by training the attention, for the possibility of such an act. (Simone Weil Reader 234)

As discussed earlier, Weil’s sense of Platonic ideals inform her concept of attention as a means to see external, timeless forms. For Weil, education is a training of the attentive faculty, a way to access the Truth, which is reality itself. She says,

In order to direct one’s attention to the perfect patterns of things, one has to stop valuing things which are always changing and not eternal. One can look at the same world, which is before our eyes, either from the point of view of its relation to time, or from that of its relationship to eternity. Education means turning the soul in the direction in which it should look, of delivering the soul from the passions. (qtd. in vander Ruhr 56 from Weil’s Lectures on Philosophy)
While it is indeed possible to deliberately practice self-denial as a means of focusing one’s attention outside the self, there is also a sense of grace that is integral to Weil’s concept of attention. The idea of waiting and receptivity is a cornerstone of her thinking. Indeed, it appears at the very heart of her definition of attention as she says, “Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object” (Waiting for God 112-113). She advises that in order to receive this external truth, “our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive the object in its naked truth” (Waiting for God 112-113). And so there is paradox and contradiction in her definition. On the one hand, attention is a supremely difficult, self-denying practice. But on the other, Weil claims that, “We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them” (Waiting for God 112). Perhaps it is more accurate therefore, to think of the work of attention as an intentional practice of opening one’s mind to receive a truth outside of one’s self. To this end Weil claims, “The true road exists. Plato and many others have followed it. But it is open only to those who, recognizing themselves to be incapable of finding it, give up looking for it, and yet do not cease to desire it to the exclusion of everything else” (Simone Weil Reader 131).

A theme of self-denial re-emerges here. The attentive gaze therefore, is a sort of emptying, a practice of readiness and receptivity to an external truth. The issues of language and the delicacies of translation are also important points to consider, as Weil wrote in French. Theorist Michael Ross points out Weil’s use of “attendre,” “attente,” “attention” and “attentive” and the subtle differences between these terms. He says,

Attendre and attente refer to the arrival of the other to the one who waits, whereas attention and attentive have to do with the way the other is presented in a correlation to the one who receives this presentation. It is critical to note that this phenomenology of presentation and reception as described in these words also has to do with specific practices of care (soin), concern, and considerateness. As Weil used them, they unmistakably and deliberately convey the sense that when we wait on another’s arrival, or pay attention to the appearance of another, we are attending in concrete ways to their good.” (Ross 45)

It appears therefore, that Weil’s concept of attention as expressed in her first language certainly does describe a gaze that is directed away from one’s self. The degree to
which a sense of waiting or receptivity to an other is implied in this practice seems to depend on the choice of the translator – it is a matter of nuance.

The Role of Action

The life of Simone Weil is a particularly poignant study on the relationship between attention and action. Weil repeatedly and willingly sacrificed her own physical well-being to put her ideas into practice. In addition to the examples mentioned earlier, Simone Weil also denied herself most physical comforts including a comfortable bed, adequate food and any advantages available to her by her family and social connections. She identified so keenly with the cause of the worker that she went so far as to seek out work on an assembly line in a Renault automobile factory for six months. Her intention in setting out to do factory work was to try to understand first-hand why Marx’s revolution had never happened. What she discovered left her disenchanted with politics and critical of the notion of revolution as the inevitable deliverance of the worker. While her experiences affirmed some of Marx’s critiques of capitalism, including alienation as the consequence of the division of labour, they also led her to conclude that Marxist theory did not take into account what it was like to live the life of the worker – an experience she found exhausting, depressing and demoralizing. She confessed in Waiting for God, “As I worked in the factory, indistinguishable to all eyes, including my own, from the anonymous mass, the affliction of others entered into my flesh and my
For Simone Weil, the worker's plight demands a spiritual response. She observes,

The beautiful alone enables us to be satisfied by what is. Workers need poetry more than bread. They need some light from eternity. Religion alone can be the source of such poetry. It is not religion but revolution that is the opium of the masses. Deprivation of this poetry explains all forms of demoralization. (Gravity and Grace 159)

In spite of her political disillusionment, Simone Weil maintained a deep compassion for the suffering of others. She continued to act in solidarity with the suffering – actively as well as through self-deprivation – until her death. The practice of attention is the common thread throughout her life. Rather than describing a prescription for a particular form of action, for Weil the practice of attention itself is action. She says,

To know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do – that is enough, the rest follows of itself. The authentic and pure values – truth, beauty, goodness – in the activity of the human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object. (Gravity and Grace 107)

Weil described factory work in terms of her experience of the psychological conditions of servitude and oppression – accessible she believed not by theory, but only through direct experience. What she found led her to reject Marx’s prohibition on the ownership of private property, as she believed that ownership was a fundamental human need. She criticized a purely political response to the worker's predicament saying, "Only when I think that the great Bolshevik leaders proposed to create a free working class and that doubtless none of them – certainly not Trotsky, and I don't think Lenin either – had ever set foot inside a factory, so that they hadn't the faintest idea of the real conditions which make servitude or freedom for the workers – well, politics appears to me a sinister farce." (qtd. in von der Ruhr 61 from Weil’s letter to Albertine Thevenon). Weil’s experience in the factory led her to explore the essential spiritual and psychological needs of the worker in her book The Need for Roots. She insists that the worker needs to have an opportunity to express his or her freedom though meaningful work, which for Weil means freedom from boredom and fear, a sense of collectivity and belonging, as well as a say in both the conditions and product of labour. For Weil, existing factory conditions violate the fundamental dignity of the worker.

For Simone Weil, an intellectual awareness of the suffering of others is insufficient. She writes, “to desire the existence of the other is to transport himself onto him by sympathy, and as a result, to have a share in the state of inert matter which is his” (Waiting for God 147). Her choices to engage directly in suffering reflect her belief that direct and personal experience is necessary to personally experience suffering in order to understand it and that this is what is demanded by looking beyond the self with attention. For Weil, attention requires involvement in a shared reality.
Thus attention demands the observer to fully accept and identify with the vulnerability of the other. It de-thrones the self as the centre of one’s life. When we practice looking at another person with pure attention, we exist side-by-side, each of us with our own unique and complete way of being in the world. Theorist Peta Bowden describes this quality of Weil’s though, writing,

If we are to attend to others, we must ‘transport’ ourselves to that centre of thought from which the other person reads values, resisting at all costs the temptations to impose or force our own point of view on others, even when we believe that point of view may be in their own best interest. (Bowden 62)

Thus for Weil, attention is a way to embrace the full humanity of the other, along with the ethical responsibilities that this implies.

The Human Condition

Weil’s portrait of the human condition is both gentle and critical. She is sensitive to our human vulnerability saying, “human existence is so fragile a thing and exposed to such dangers that I cannot love without trembling” (Waiting for God xii). But in spite of her compassion for human fragility, Weil also describes a human nature that seems to be hard-wired for distraction and avoidance. She describes “the refuge of laziness and inertia, a temptation to which I succumb very often” as a “particularly despicable form of consolation” (The Simone Weil Reader 41). Weil portrays the enormously difficult practice of attention in the face of our proclivities for avoidance as a moral triumph saying,

In this project, I use the terms “human nature” and “the human condition” interchangeably, as they often are. Both terms are used to describe some sort of shared human experience. “The human condition” usually denotes facts of existence, including birth, growth, awareness of our own mortality and an experience of emotions. “Human nature” is more of an evaluative assessment of what human beings are like – are we fundamentally greedy or altruistic? What is the role of our nature versus our nurture? Are there common human traits? These are questions with historically contingent answers, relying on religion and philosophy. For the purposes of this project, I rely on the nuances implied in both terms and use them both to refer to Weil and Murdoch’s assessments of what it means to be human.
There is something in our soul which has a far more violent repugnance for true attention than the flesh has for bodily fatigue. This something is much more closely connected with evil than is the flesh. That is why every time that we really concentrate our attention, we destroy the evil in ourselves. If we concentrate with this intention, a quarter of an hour of attention is better than many good works (ibid 96).

Here Weil demonstrates her conviction that the internal practice of attention to another is ethical territory – albeit an extremely difficult practice which seems to run counter to our natural inclinations. Success is in the concentrated effort to overcome our natural resistance to such difficult work.

**An Eye for Complexity**

For Weil, attention means seeing things outside of one’s self in their totality, which is Truth. She goes as far as to say that “not to accept an event in the world is to wish that the world did not exist” (*Gravity and Grace* 129). Attention for Weil means receptivity to all of “what is.” When one attends to all external realities equally, one is necessarily exposed to the co-existence of contradictory truths. For Weil, however, the truth of one revelation does not negate the opposing truth of the other. She comments,

> If both must be accepted [two incompatible thoughts], the contradiction then must be recognized as a fact. It must then be used as a two-limbed tool, like a pair of pincers…Contradiction itself, far from always being a criterion of error, is sometimes a sign of truth. Plato knew this. (qtd. in Metereau 54 from Weil’s *Oppression and Liberty*)

Weilian scholars Frost and Metereau argue that a sense of paradox and complexity are key aspects to her thought. They claim,

> Simone Weil, long before postmodernist and deconstructionist ideas became current, was concerned with recognizing the absence of consistency in life, the continual presence of reversals and contradictions, and the unavoidable existence of these even within ‘solutions’ to problems of the human condition. (Frost and Metereau 35)

Simone Weil’s own life and ideas are filled with the contradictions she embraced philosophically. For example, she refused to align herself with organized religion, and
yet said in *Waiting for God* that she was “born, grew up in and always remained under Christian inspiration” (*Waiting for God* 22). She wrote passionately about the beauty of the world, and yet lived an extremely ascetic lifestyle, denying herself most sensual pleasures. Weil understood freedom to be the result of yielding entirely to the will of God, rather than a casting off of limits and restrictions. Frost and Metereau argue that Weil’s embrace of contradiction and complexity are an inevitable result of looking at the entirety of the world with attention. This was not the only way that Simone Weil stood out from her contemporaries.

**An Extreme Figure**

The first of Weil’s writings were translated into English in 1951, with introductions by her personal friends Friar Perrin and Gustave Thibon as well as T.S. Eliot. In addition to their admiration for her keen intelligence, these writers also focused on her personal problems, and in particular Weil’s capacity for self-denial and self-discipline. They note that she repeatedly placed herself in incredibly demanding situations, and often those that were ill-suited to her frail constitution. Physical ailments, including severe migraines and what is often described as anorexia, plagued Weil for most of her life, and indeed there is some evidence that she deprived herself of food so acutely that it led directly to her death. In other words, she was well acquainted with pain. Susan Sontag commented on her extremity, characterizing her thought and her being as a way for a reader to, “pay his respect to a level of spiritual reality which is not, could not be, his own” (qtd. in Gray 229). Perhaps the appeal of Weil’s thought lies in its ability to enable the reader to vicariously experience a commitment to the pursuit of truth at the expense of nearly all physical comfort. As Gray asserts in the conclusion of her

---

8 See introductions to the 1951 publications of *Waiting for God, Gravity and Grace* and *The Need for Roots*.

9 Simone Weil’s “anorexia” has been the subject of some discussion and debate. Anna Freud did not believe she met the criteria for anorexia, as Weil’s self-deprivation expressed her social and spiritual ideals rather than a distorted sense of a loathsome physical body. For further discussion see introductions mentioned in footnote 8 as well as Leslie Fiedler’s article and Robert Coles’ biography listed in the bibliography.
biography of Weil: “She goes further than any of us would dare to venture, she does it for us” (Gray 229). Certainly Weil’s willingness to eschew her own physical well-being seems to be an expression of her focus on the other – a central concept of her thought. For Weil, that practice involves self-negation. She asserts,

Attention alone – that attention which is so full that the ‘I’ disappears – is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call ‘I’ of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived. (Gravity and Grace 107)

For Weil, attention goes beyond directing one’s focus outside of one’s self. It is an effort so intense, that one’s own self is eclipsed, both by the work of looking and by what is perceived as a result.

**Weil as Christian Mystic**

Although Weil was raised in a secular Jewish family, and suffered from the anti-Semitic policies that were sweeping Europe in the 1930’s (including being barred from teaching in 1940), she did not identify or align herself with Judaism in any way. Instead, Weil’s philosophy is infused with an undeniably Christian quality. Her writing features themes of sacrifice, redemption, original sin, submission to God and grace. Weil’s own self-identification as a Christian is complicated, however. After the first of her three self-identified transcendent, mystical experiences, she identified herself with

---

10 Most of the books written about Weil at least mention that she overtly denied a personal connection with her Jewish heritage and that she rejected Judaism as an organized religion. Many of her critics label her as an anti-Semite because of her lack of attention to the increasingly desperate Jewish plight in Europe during the 1930’s and early 1940’s as well as her overt condemnation of Jewish theology and distinctive cultural identity. (These critics include Rachel Brenner, Hans Meyerhoff and Robert Coles.) However, alternative interpretations of Weil’s “Jewishness” have been offered. Writers including Robert Nevin and Sylvie Weil (Simone’s niece) assert that Simone Weil’s Judaism is implicit in her ideas. These authors argue that Simone Weil’s devotion to those who were suffering, her sense of justice as well as her own self-abnegation are rooted in the Jewish theological and cultural tradition.
Christianity, albeit unconventionally. While she wrote extensively about the connections between God and attention and love and beauty, she refused to join the Roman Catholic Church, saying, “I have always remained on the threshold of the Church, without moving, quite still, in endurance” (Waiting for God 75). At times she could be highly critical of the religion in its organized form, as when she said, “Christianity is, in effect, apart from a few isolated centres of inspiration, something socially in accordance with the interests of those who exploit the people” (qtd. in Frost and Metereau 102 from The Need for Roots). Prolific Weilian scholar Eric O. Springfield asserts that Weil’s reasons for not wanting to join the Christian church include her fear that its social nature could undermine a focus on God. Springfield also describes Weil’s sense that in joining the Church she would be betraying people and ideas outside the Christian Church that she considered to be spiritually valuable, including the ancient Greeks and the insights of other religions such as Buddhism or Hinduism. Most importantly for Weil, Springfield claims, is her sense that God did not want her in the Church (Springfield, 22, 23). For Weil, obedience to God is supreme. Her sense of God is akin to a sense of Platonic Truth – it is an absolute authority to be obeyed, regardless of the personal cost.

As it is problematic to describe Simone Weil as a Christian, it is more accurate to describe her as a mystic who was highly influenced by many of the tenets of Christianity. Weil described one of her mystical experiences saying,

At a moment of intense physical pain, while I was making the effort to love, although believing I had no right to give any name to the love, I felt, while completely unprepared for it (I had never read the mystics), a presence more personal, more certain, and more real than that of a human being; it was inaccessible both to sense and to imagination, and it resembled the love that irradiates the tenderest smile of somebody one loves. Since that moment, the name of God and the name of Christ have been more and more irresistibly mingled with my thoughts. (The Simone Weil Reader 39).

von der Ruhr argues that Weil’s ideas always had “deeply religious undertones” (von der Ruhr, pg 76) and that her acknowledgement of Christianity, rather than a conversion, represents a “progressive deepening of an attitude whose character remains fundamentally unchanged, no matter what aspect of her life is singled out for close inspection.” (ibid)
Weil describes her most dramatic mystical experience (which took place in the Abbey of Solesmes during Easter of 1938 while reciting George Herbert’s poem “Love”) as one in which “Christ himself came down and took possession of me” (qtd. in von der Ruhr 14). Naturally, Weil’s mystical experiences impacted her deeply. Her personal friend Gustave Thibon describes Weil’s very person as infused with mysticism saying,

... a limpid mysticism emanated from her; in no other human being have I come across such familiarity with religious mysteries; never have I felt the word *supernatural* to be more charged with reality than when in contact with her. (*Gravity and Grace* viii)

Subsequent to her mystical experiences, Weil’s writings focus increasingly on God as a source of Truth. In a way, she fuses her Platonism with Christianity as a means of understanding absolute and external Truth and Goodness.

Simone Weil remained an uncompromising figure until her death. Even Kenneth Rexworth, one of her harshest critics, called her “one of the most remarkable women of the twentieth, or indeed of any other century.”¹² In the face of injustice or pain, Simone Weil’s ideas offer little comfort to those seeking respite or cure. Instead, Weil calls her readers to meet the world with the honest and all-seeing gaze of attention. In so doing, one is compelled to look beyond self-interest to the reality of an other’s fragile humanity. To attend to another is to bear witness to the truth of their suffering, for attention is not intended to ameliorate pain. Indeed, the extremity of her radical personal devotion and sacrifice have haunted those who encounter her ideas, including T.S. Eliot, Albert Camus, Martin Buber, Hannah Arendt and others. I turn now to a detailed examination of the impact of Weil’s concept of attention on the writer and philosopher Iris Murdoch, and explore how Murdoch adapted and extended Weil’s concept of attention to form the basis of her theory of ethics.

¹² Rexroth’s article was first published as “The Dialectic of Agony” in The Nation in January 1957.
Chapter 2.

Enter Iris Murdoch

The ideas of the passionate and mystical figure of Simone Weil inspired Iris Murdoch in her own philosophical exploration of ethics. She acknowledges her indebtedness in her essay *The Sovereignty of Good*, writing,

I have used the idea of attention which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent.” (SOG 33)

This practice of attention as an ongoing way of being is central to Murdoch’s conception of ethics. Her position is contingent on several underlying presumptions, including a belief in the fundamental selfishness of human nature and the existence of a “true” Platonic goodness. Murdoch borrows Simone Weil’s concept of attention as a method of discipline and discernment – a way of dealing with the human condition and means of seeing what is, or the Truth.

There are also echoes of Weil in Iris Murdoch’s understanding of the human condition. Like Weil, Murdoch recognizes the enormous human capacity for self-preoccupation. Murdoch describes this weak and fragile human nature saying,

One of its main pastimes is daydreaming. 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 though fictions of a theological nature. (SOG 77)

Murdoch’s sense of the human condition is also impacted by Freud’s pessimistic view of human nature, which she called “a realistic and detailed picture of the fallen
man” (SOG 50). She sums up her Freudian and Weilian understanding of human nature saying, “In the moral life, the enemy is the big fat ego” (SOG 51). If attention is the method of countering this natural human condition, it requires daily work and commitment. Murdoch observes,

the difficulty is to keep the attention fixed upon the real situation and to prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy and despair…It is a task to come to see the world as it is. (SOG 89)

When we are able to use the practice of attention to overcome, even momentarily, our selfish pre-occupations, we open up our capacity to be present to a reality that is not our own. Murdoch says, “We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need” (SOG 58). When we are able to do this, Murdoch says that right action will follow as well as “an increasing awareness of the unity and interdependence of the moral world” (SOG 68). Thus for Murdoch, the cultivation of the attentive state of mind is an ethical activity.

For Murdoch, this practice of ethical attention is rewarded with a glimpse of an underlying Truth. She writes, “Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality” (SOG 87). Murdoch’s concept of justice is predicated on her Platonic sense that Truth does exist, and our ability to perceive it is clouded by our solipsistic human condition. When we are unable to look beyond our own self-interest, we are unable to see a reality that lies beyond appearance. Our ability to apprehend the truth which lies beyond what she calls “our ordinary dulled consciousness” or “the veil” (SOG 88) is only possible through the practice of attention. When we attend to an other,

we discover value in our ability to forget self, to be realistic, to perceive justly. We use our imaginations not to escape the world but to join it, and this exhilarates us because of the distance between our ordinary dulled consciousnesses and an apprehension of the real (SOG 88).

Here the undeniable influence of Plato’s thought is evident. But Murdoch takes her Platonic understanding a step further than an abstract ideal of goodness. She is interested in a qualitative description of what the good looks like and how to get there. She asks, “What is a good man like? How can we make ourselves morally better?”
SOG 51) Murdoch actively and extensively investigates these questions in her works of fiction – a point I shall return to.

The Inextricability of Action

Iris Murdoch insists that the internal struggle to see Truth beyond one’s self-interest is a deliberate ethical task. Rather than restricting her sense of ethics to a code of observable and measurable behaviour, Murdoch is inspired by Weil’s concept of attention to describe moral deliberations as legitimate ethical activity. She says, “How we see and describe the world is ethics too” (EM 73). This point resonates with Weil’s perception that there is value in turning our attention to an other – the act of looking itself, with attention, is to take action. Murdoch observes,

true vision occasions right conduct…The more the separateness and differentness of other people is realized, and the fact seen that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one’s own, the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing (SOG 64).

In other words, for Murdoch (and for Weil) to look at an other with attention is to take action because it is to see with an eye for intrinsic value, it is to look without thinking of the other instrumentally. Implicit in this seeing is a prohibition on treating an other as an object. Through the practice of attention, we catch a glimpse of “the reality that transcends us” (EM 352-353). This is the ethical achievement.

Murdoch describes attention as a life-long ethical practice. She has a sense that an individual’s inner life is messy - in an ongoing state of flux and evolution. Therefore she does not see the “ethical” as boiling down to a critical moment of decision-making. Rather, Murdoch sees the moral life as “something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial” (SOG 36). Or to put it succinctly, “If I attend properly I will have no choice and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed for” (SOG 38). Murdoch is interested in the quotidian nature of this effort – the cultivation of an attentive sensibility. She describes this saying, “the exercise of our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time” (SOG 36). While attention is ultimately the method of perceiving Platonic ideals, the daily practice of
attention is focused on the details of lived experience. Murdoch therefore, positions her practice in the messy material world.

Murdoch’s insistence on the ongoing and often undetectable work of attention is an alternative to the existentialism of her day and its emphasis on freedom and choice. In particular, Murdoch is critical of what she sees as existentialism's over-reliance on “the will” and the absence of any guiding external wisdom or truths. She observes,

Our picture of ourselves has become too grand, we have isolated and identified ourselves with an unrealistic conception of will, we have lost the vision of a reality separate from ourselves, and we have no adequate conception of original sin. (SOG 46)

For Murdoch, the ethical life is an ongoing, deliberate transformative process – one that requires many resources to draw from. She is concerned that the existentialist understanding of the human condition is inadequate. She comments, “The agent’s freedom, indeed his moral quality, resides in his choices, and yet we are not told what prepares him for the choices” (SOG 52). Murdoch’s theory of ethics reflects her belief that the moral life is far more than “right” action – it is a messy, ongoing project that requires an intentional direction of attention away from the self.

**Murdoch and Complexity**

Several Murdochian scholars have grappled with some initially glaring contradictions in her ideas about the self and selfishness. To put it simply, if the practice of attention is an ethical method of overcoming a solipsistic human condition, how are we to know if we have been effective in our efforts if we do not engage in self-reflection? If we accept Murdoch’s assertion that the internal process of deliberation and transformation falls within the domain of ethics, a requirement for an individual to look inward in order to evaluate her/his moral progress seems necessary. But this solipsistic gaze is of course, what the whole practice of attention is meant to ameliorate. Surely Murdoch couldn’t have intended to negate critical and intentional self-examination in the interest of deliberately aligning oneself to an ideal of goodness.
In the case of M and D in the *Sovereignty of Good* for example, Murdoch tells a simple moral parable in which a woman transforms her initial antipathy toward her daughter-in-law after a period of internal reflection and attention. Murdoch says that M “reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters…the change is not in D’s behaviour but in M’s mind” (*SOG* 17). M focuses her attention on herself, but it is intended as a means of overcoming her own pettiness (her jealousy, prejudices, etc.) toward her daughter-in-law. But M practices a very particular form of attention – that of “an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her” (*SOG* 17). Literary theorist Samantha Vice argues that this example demonstrates the ethical importance of self-deliberation with the recognition that the self can be easily seduced into comfort and distraction (returning again to Murdoch’s view of human nature). Instead, the purpose of attention is to perceive “truth” in the Platonic sense. Vice writes,

- “Attending with a loving gaze upon reality without ever turning to the self is to ignore a part of the world that we strive to know and to disregard the very instrument, as it were, with which we gain knowledge” (Vice 64).

Therefore, Vice’s interpretation of the role of self-reflection in Murdoch’s thought is in keeping with the spirit of “unselfing.” Vice sees self-deliberation as a tool in the service of a larger orientation toward otherness. Christopher Mole grapples with the same contradictions in Murdoch, namely her belief that attention to oneself is a source of moral failure because ethical behavior is about the attempt to “unself.” Again, he highlights the issue of reconciling Murdoch’s prohibition on self-directedness with the problem of method – how are we to grow ethically if we do not look at ourselves? He concludes that the criteria for ethical action – even when it involves attention to the self – is that it is “world involving” (Mole 73). Mole asserts that an ethically acceptable orientation necessarily includes a perspective that goes far beyond self-interest. Instead, it is focused on an external “reality.” Even if assessment of the gaze requires self-reflection and analysis, what is most important is that this is done in the Murdochian spirit of inclusion and other-directedness.

There is another layer of complexity at the heart of Murdoch’s definition of attention. On the one hand, she is concerned with a central, transcendent big idea – the existence of a universal ideal of the Good. Murdoch’s practice of patient, careful
attention is a means to access the truth of a particular situation through restraining the viewer’s own selfish agenda or interests. For Murdoch the Good and Truth do exist – they are not concepts that are relative and contextually contingent – they shine as immutable Platonic ideals. The disciplined method of attention is a way to see these Truths, which is a Weilian-inspired receptivity to something outside of oneself. Therefore Murdoch’s ethical theory initially appears to be wholly theoretical and abstract, far removed from the material world. However, the practice of attention requires one to be necessarily embedded and engaged with the struggle in particular real-world situations to know and understand the good. We must become involved in order to be ethically active, and this involvement is necessarily messy and “muddled.” Often the “good” or “right” thing is very complicated and difficult to discern. It is only through participation in the struggle that it is possible to come to an understanding of the good. Murdoch is interested in qualitative descriptions of goodness through an exploration of the characteristics and virtues of goodness (such as repentance or courage). Even though these virtues may have different meanings for different people, or indeed different meanings to one individual over a lifetime, they are still expressions of an ideal external form. Manifestations of that goodness come to have meaning because they are lived. An individual’s discernment and exploration of what that the good means to them is a complex and ongoing process. Rather than leaving her description of the ethical life in the abstract theoretical realm, Murdoch suggests a practical resource saying, “innumerable novels contain accounts of what such struggles are like” (SOG 22). Indeed for Murdoch, the novel is a pedagogical tool; in fact, it is an indispensable resource for ethical instruction.

**Murdoch and the Novel**

Murdoch argued passionately for the importance of art to the ethical life, and the novel in particular. Her collections of philosophical essays featured in *Existentialists and Mystics* as well *The Sovereignty of Good* explicitly discuss the importance of literature to
the moral life. Murdoch wrote these treatises in response to her impression of her contemporary intellectual climate. She describes her situation in The Sovereignty of Good:

- It is behaviourist in its connection of the meaning and being of action with the publicly observable, it is existentialist in its elimination of the substantial self and its emphasis on the solitary omnipotent will, and it is utilitarian in its assumption that morality is and can only be concerned with public acts. (SOG 9)

The crux of Murdoch’s position is her insistence on a return to the nature and practice of Goodness (ethics) as topics for philosophical elucidation in the face of what she calls the “ethically impoverished” language of her contemporaries (SOG 56). For Murdoch, ethical concerns are as much about internal deliberations, struggle and transformation as outwardly observable actions. She is interested in a practical elaboration on the complex relationship between human beings and the Platonic ideal of goodness:

We need more concepts than our philosophies have furnished us with. We need to be enabled to think in terms of degrees of freedom, and picture, in a non-metaphysical, non-totalitarian and non-religious sense, the transcendence of reality. (EM 293)

13 It is not entirely accurate to characterize Murdoch’s philosophical position as representative of either the Analytic or Continental schools of philosophy, as she embraced and critiqued elements of both perspectives. She was certainly critical of the analytical school’s insistence on reason as the sole criteria for right action and the absence of the “inner life in the moral sphere” (SOG 8) as a worthy point of consideration. Her first publication was a study of Sartre, but she also took serious issue with what she saw as the over-valuing of the will and lack of a rich and substantial ethical vocabulary in continental existentialism, saying, “Values which were previously in some sense inscribed in the heavens and guaranteed by God collapse into the human will. There is no transcendent reality. The idea of the good remains indefinable and empty so that human choice may fill it” (SOG 78-9). Murdoch was also highly critical of the analytic school’s linguistic and theoretical deconstruction of text, saying, “We have become mesmerized by the glass of the window we used simply to look through” (EM 89). Murdoch wants to look through the glass to the ideal of goodness. It is most accurate therefore, to think of her as a Platonist who uses the form of Goodness as an external ethical referent. She writes, “The image of the Good as a transcendent magnetic centre seems to me the least corruptible and most realistic picture for us to use in our reflections upon the moral life” (SOG 73).
Murdoch argues that literature, which she calls “an education in how to picture and understand human situations,” (SOG 33) is the best means of exploring this terrain. She observes,

Our current picture of freedom encourages a dream-like facility; whereas what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexities of the moral life and the opacities 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 (EM 293).

Murdoch sees the novel as a source of this rich and valuable vocabulary, and says, ‘in moral philosophy we need what literature gives us, namely more concepts, richer and deeper ones, to express the value that will otherwise evacuate the world’ (qtd. in Haines 89). Murdoch put this conviction into practice, as she herself was a prolific novelist who wrote more than twenty critically acclaimed novels in addition to plays and works of poetry. It is certainly significant that Murdoch herself explored this genre so extensively. Anne Rowe and Avril Horner explain the appeal of Murdoch’s use of multiple genres saying,

Her work has sparked such interest because of her unique position as a working moral philosopher and practicing novelist whose fiction tests and contests the moral stances to which she commits herself in her philosophical essays (despite the fact that she said repeatedly that she did not want philosophy to intrude into her fictional writing). Thus her novels do not function as mere illustrations of her moral philosophy but as meditations on, and counterpoints to, the positions she puts forward there (Rowe and Horner 1).

Literary theorist Scott Moore says, "Murdoch believes that fiction can show what philosophy can only say” (Moore 101) and names a ‘say-show’ distinction at the heart of Murdoch’s fiction in which the philosophies her characters espouse “inevitably pale in comparison to the picture they paint with their lives” (ibid, 101). The character of Tallis from Murdoch’s novel A Fairly Honorable Defeat serves as an effective illustration of
what a “good” character looks like. In the novel, the long-suffering Tallis, housed in one of the most disgusting homes I’ve ever read about, does the “right” thing. He lives with and shows love and patience toward his crude and bitter aged father, he holds no resentment toward his estranged wife who left him for another man (although he is tormented by it), he works for very little money as a teacher, he gives his time as a volunteer, and in a moment of decisive action, he ends a violent scene at a restaurant by hitting a racist, aggressive thug. Tallis is able to show his goodness through his actions. He is not rewarded with the attainment of his desires however, as he remains estranged from his wife at the end of the story in spite of his desire to reconcile. Thus his goodness is not a means to an end, although he is able to rise to the occasion in the critical moment at the restaurant. His character does not achieve lasting happiness or fulfillment because of his goodness. Indeed, Moore argues that the ethical value of Murdoch’s characters is qualitative, saying, “The moral life is seen in those whose habits and instincts exemplify the unselfishness and the honesty that pursue the good for its own sake, without threat of punishment or promise of reward” (Moore 102). Surely Tallis is this type of character. Murdoch’s portrayal of Tallis is a qualitative examination of what the good looks like, and frankly, it is often unappealing. Thus Murdoch does not offer a persuasive vision of Goodness by suggesting that Goodness begets any kind of compensation. Goodness speaks for itself, and is not a means to any other end but itself. Instead, a description of a “good” character enriches a vocabulary of Goodness, that which we see and recognize by instinct. This is its ethical value.

But for Murdoch, ethical development is not just about deepening one’s own personalized understanding of the form of Goodness. It also requires one to become aware of the existence of an other. Murdochian scholar Edith Brugmans notes,

14 Tallis’s home is described as having an “indescribably horrible smell” with “unwashed milk bottles yellow with varying quantities of sour milk” a garbage bin “crammed to overflowing stood open to reveal a rotting coagulated mess of organic material covered with flies”. and “the floor was no only filthy but greasy and sticky and made a sucking noise as Hilda lifted her feet.” (AFHD 60, 61) This description does not endear Tallis to his readers, and he is often described in the novel as boring and tedious. Perhaps this is Murdoch’s exploration of the aesthetics of the hard work of goodness, which has its own reward, as well as a visceral depiction of what she often referred to as the “messiness” of life.
Contrary to the behaviourist account of morality that prevailed in the 1960’s, Murdoch argues that leading a moral life is a progressive process of imagining the being of the other. Not reason, not sense perception, but the imagination is singled out as the faculty by which we acquire and develop moral knowledge. (Brugmans 48)

Murdoch calls this imagination “essential” because it enables us to “picture and realize, make real to oneself, the existence and being of other people” (EM 322). In other words, the imagination cultivates empathy. It also enables us to understand that we are not the centre of the universe, and that indeed every person has an equally legitimate claim to exceptionality. Attention sparks the ethical imagination. When we imagine the being and experiences of those who are not us, we see a more truthful and complete picture of reality. As Murdoch writes, “we use our imagination not to escape the world but to join it” (SOG 88).

The Ethical Turn in Literature

Iris Murdoch’s attention to the inner life of her fictional characters and her belief in the ethical power of art and the novel in particular have much in common with, and can even be argued to have a part in contributing to a shift in literary criticism that Martha Nussbaum named “the ethical turn in literature” in 1990. Literary theorists who see literature as a source of ethics mine the novel for its complex consideration of the ethical life. These critics include David Parker, Cora Diamond, Martha Nussbaum and Wayne Booth. Similarly, ethicists such as Alistair MacIntyre are increasingly likely to use literary references to explore and illustrate their points. As Colin McGinn states, “Literature is where moral thinking lives and breathes on the page” (qtd. in Vogler 6). Raymond Gaita describes great literature, calling it:

Descriptions of actions and character through which we explore our sense of what we have done and what we are, of what is fine and what is tawdry, of what is shallow and what is deep, of what is noble and what is base, and so on… (qtd. in Haines 29).

David Parker argues a similar point - that a deep and “thick” ethical discussion is necessary to informed participation in the real world, and asserts that the novel can be a rich source of ethical concepts and language. Nussbaum concurs, claiming,
The sense that we are social beings puzzling out, in times of great moral difficulty, what might be for us, the best way to live – this sense of practical importance, which animates contemporary ethical theory and has always animated much of great literature, is absent from the writings of many of our leading literary theorists. (Renegotiating Ethics 2)

Therefore both Parker and Nussbaum would like the discussion around literature to concern itself with Aristotle’s guiding ethical questions, namely: How should a human being live? What does it mean to live well, and to flourish? Literary theorists with an interest in literature as an exploration of ethics are interested in the novel as a source of rich and “thick” descriptions of what is meaningful and valuable to us in our attempts to live a good and ethical life.

Paying Attention

This returns the discussion full-circle back to Murdoch. The ideas of Nussbaum, Parker and other literary theories about the ethically instructive potential of the novel resound with Murdoch’s own belief in the ethical potential of the novel. To reiterate this point, I return to Murdoch who declares,

But the most essential and fundamental aspect of culture is the study of literature, since this is an education in how to picture and understand human situations. We are men and we are moral agents before we are scientists, and the place of science in human life must be discussed in words. That is why it is and always will be more important to know about Shakespeare than to know about any scientist. (SOG 33)

Thus Murdoch reveals her position that our common humanity and ethical capacity are of supreme importance, and can be cultivated by the study and consideration of literature. The novel is such a powerful tool for ethical instruction because it draws the reader’s attention to the inner life of an other. This in turn illuminates human frailty, complexity and “muddle.” For Murdoch, this attunement nurtures empathy and an ethical sensibility.
Rather than continue to review and extend this discussion on the ethical value of the novel (an extensive and ongoing discourse), I wish to return to the central consideration of this paper – and that is the broader concept of attention. For Murdoch, the novel serves this purpose. It is one of several techniques that draw our gaze from self to other. It is the same with what she calls “great art” (in her definition, that which reveals the Truth about the world). Similarly, Simone Weil describes attention as the underlying lesson of academic study, as it provides the opportunity to concentrate on a truth outside of the self, an opportunity to hone the skill of absolute focus. For Weil and Murdoch, attention is looking beyond the self to the independent existence of an other, and ultimately, of Truth. Attention is the attempt to see what is not the self. It is a perspective that is open to a sense of inherent value in an other, it is looking without thinking instrumentally.

In the chapter that follows, I deepen my exploration of Weil and Murdoch’s theoretical concept of attention and exemplify their ideas with my own personal experiments in deliberately paying attention to the world beyond my self. I reflect on the ethical impact of meeting both the human and non-human other in light of Weil and Murdoch’s theory of attention.

15 For further reading on the connection between ethics and the novel, see David Parker, Martha Nussbaum, Jane Adamson, Cora Diamond and Wayne Booth. Details in the bibliography.
Chapter 3.

Attention in Action

The practice of attention is far more than an abstract ethical position or a theory contending with several alternative philosophies. Rather, for both Weil and Murdoch, attention is a way of being, it is a unity of theory and practice. Not only is this an essential component of the theoretical concept of attention, it was expressed in how both women lived their lives. Simone Weil practiced attention to others through her devotion, at great personal cost, to those she called the “afflicted.”\(^{16}\) Iris Murdoch deepened her sense of the nature and challenges of a moral life, building what she called a “vocabulary of attention” (\textit{EM} 293) through the situations and characters in her novels. For both theorists therefore, the practice of attention is action – action and attention are inextricable from one another, they are one and the same. Even if it is an internal struggle to orient oneself toward the other, attention is the ongoing act of striving to see Truth, it is an other-oriented perspective.

In this latter section therefore, in the spirit of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, I will discuss my own attempts to investigate attention as an active practice. For the past several months I have been exploring an attentive orientation toward that which is not me – specifically through documenting my daily experiences commuting to work by bicycle. I began with the intention of focusing on the non-human world in particular, but inevitably other people could not be ignored. In this third chapter I will draw from

\(^{16}\) Weil did not consider herself or any other person to be immune from the possibility of suffering. Rather, Weil felt solidarity with “the afflicted” and did not distinguish herself. She explains saying, “The sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labeled ‘unfortunate,’ but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction. For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way” (\textit{Waiting for God}, 116).
observations, challenges and images that I have collected in the form of photographs and a blog I created to reflect on my study (found at http://www.flickr.com/photos/oneyearcycle/ and http://oneyearcycle.tumblr.com/). In this last section of the project therefore, I weave my personal anecdotes with Weil and Murdoch’s theoretical meditations on the active nature of attentiveness to the other. In so doing, I hope to deepen and exemplify my understanding of their concepts.

Other People Exist

I begin with an edited recount of my experience and struggle with meeting other people with the gaze of attention; specifically the strangers that I encounter every day on my bicycle commute. It is one thing to describe the virtues of an attentive ethical orientation toward the other in the abstract. It is quite another to put it into practice.

The High Cost of Attention – November 2010

One of the abiding joys of my commute is the series of encounters with the cast of characters who frequent my bicycle route. I often cycle to work with a colleague, and we take great pleasure in caricaturing the folks who fly by us every day.

There’s Recumbent Man, whipping along snapping his chewing gum in an aggressively reclined pose. There’s BC Hydro Guy who glides by with a swift and rhythmic cadence - curly ponytail streaming behind him. There’s Guy Smiley who gives a curt yet warm nod from behind his burgundy vest every morning. KGB clicks along in her heels, impeccable suit, and rolly suitcase – all business. There’s also Scary Lady With the Dogs who drives along in her motorized scooter and becomes inevitably tangled (and enraged) in one of the three dog leashes she uses to restrain her menagerie. And you know it’s going to be a special day when you cross paths with Old Timer – a rare and reassuring sighting.

A real favourite has always been Competitive Woman. You feel her more than see her - a presence both menacing and irritating. She strains her whole body as she pumps her pedals to make each movement count. Her bike and her person are festooned with safety gear - a collection of reflective items guaranteed to make her visible. Most notable of all is her hideous vest, which billows out behind her as she creeps up behind and past you. And the thing is - she’s not really that fast. Her motivation has always appeared to be victory - to pass whoever is in her way and in so doing, assert her status as a dominant rider.
So Competitive Woman has been a source of constant amusement for quite some time. We've learned to just let her pass and hold back for a few minutes so as not to run into her at the next stop light. As we hear her approaching, huffing and puffing with determination, we can't help but snicker.

Until one day last week. Usually I ride home alone and I like to coast at a leisurely pace. The route is almost entirely downhill (which makes mornings a challenge!) and I see the time as a way to zone out and contemplate the day's events. But on that particular day, I decided that I wanted to ride quickly. I pushed myself from one traffic light to the next, striving to maintain a consistent speed up and down the hills. About halfway home, I could feel a presence behind me riding faster and faster, growing nearer and nearer. I refused to turn around, but instead accepted the challenge and pushed myself to defeat this anonymous presence. But, sure enough at a traffic light, she pulled up beside me. And of course it was Competitive Woman.

Instead of ignoring me or revving up her strength for the next leg – she asked me a simple question. “Aren’t you scared to ride in those clip shoes?” And with that single utterance, everything changed. Her disarming request voiced in her charming Quebecois accent transformed Competitive Woman into a real person – full of vulnerability complexity and contradictions. And I can't help but be fond of her!

And so, through the gaze of attention, Competitive Woman is seen, as Simone Weil says, “as she really is.” No doubt, both Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch would be pleased with this scenario, and probably see it as an ethical victory. The ethical implications of this seeing of course, are that I am compelled to act in an ethical manner toward “the other” and understand myself as part of a world in which every person sees things in their own particular way as a result of their own particular circumstances and thus any individual claim to exceptionality is unsupportable.

But what is the cost to truly let it in that “other people exist?” Simone Weil claimed,

The love of our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: What are you going through? It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection or a specimen…but as a man, exactly like us…For this reason, it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way. This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth. Only he who is capable of attention can do this. (Weil in Springstead Anthology 99)

Now I doubt if Competitive Woman is suffering (or at least it doesn’t appear to me that she is). But what does it mean to me that there are those around me who are? If the ethical act is to view the world with an
attentive gaze, what am I meant to do with the perspective that ensues? How am I ethically bound to act when I truly attend to the suffering of others (not to mention the non-human world)?

I wonder if I will ever learn more about the people I meet everyday. Will I one day discover that KGB is a single mother working hard to provide for her children? Or that Scary Lady With the Dogs used to be a happy and vibrant woman until tragedy struck? For Weil and Murdoch, the act of disciplined attention to the other is an ethical act. And so if I accept this definition of attention as an ethical gaze, I know that I ought to attune myself to the varied realities of the people around me. And in so doing, engage in the questions of what it means to do so.

But I can’t help but think nostalgically about the fun of imagining Competitive Woman as an arch-villain. If I’m honest about it, I kind of like having an enemy to position myself counter to, a nemesis to struggle with, a foil to my own self. So I admit that as I continue to explore the idea of attention as an ethical action, I can’t help but hope that some considerations will be exempt, and that someone like Old Timer will simply remain a one-dimensional beacon of hope.

In revisiting this piece of writing, I am somewhat comforted by Weil and Murdoch’s concessions that the practice of attention is so difficult that it is nearly impossible. Weil comments,

The capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle, it is a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it. Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough (Springstead Anthology 98).

Similarly, there is not a single character in any of Murdoch’s novels that has mastered the art of Goodness through attention to an other. Instead her characters are realistically flawed and vulnerable agents whose attempts at Goodness are marked with failures and heartache. In other words, they are human. Murdoch’s interest is in the messy struggle and seeking of Goodness rather than its conclusive attainment. Goodness, as she says, is “connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world” (SOG 91). The requisite practice of attention runs counter to my propensity (and I think it’s safe to say, the general human tendency) to reference everything in relation to myself. I admit that one of the pleasures in naming that which is not I, is in part to clarify more deeply who I am. But for Weil and Murdoch, this is a
selfish indulgence because others do not exist as caricatures simply to deepen my own conception of myself. Nor do others exist as a source of fantasy or comfort, for even in characterizing Old Timer as a figurehead of Goodness, I deny him his complexity and existing for-himself. For Weil and Murdoch, attention to an other has nothing to do with who I am and everything to do with opening my awareness to an independently existing reality, one which I am not the centre of. The difficulty of this task means that this undertaking will always be a struggle. I am reassured by Murdoch’s observation that “Moral change and achievement are slow; we are not free in the sense of being able suddenly to alter ourselves since we cannot suddenly alter what we can see and ergo what we desire and are compelled by” (SOG 38).

There is a gentle quality to what Murdoch is saying. She does not berate ethical shortcomings or failures. Nor does she set criteria for goodness that is so high and abstract that it is unattainable. Instead, Murdoch offers attention as a tangible, comprehensible ethical resource – one that is available for use. As she asserts, “a moral philosophy should be inhabited” (SOG 46). Her example of using the practice of attention to fall out of love illustrates her point perfectly. She writes,

It is small use telling oneself ‘Stop being in love, stop feeling resentment, be just.’ What is needed is a reorientation which will provide an energy of a different kind, from a different source….Deliberately falling out of love is not a jump of the will, it is the acquiring of new objects of attention and thus of new energies as a result of refocusing. (SOG 54)

Thus attention is a tool in the service of ethics. Murdoch’s insistence on the ongoing nature of this practice indicates that her concept of attention is a means of deepening one’s ethical character. It is a dynamic rather than static understanding of the ethical. She says, “What I am offering should be thought of as a general metaphysical background to morals and not as a formula which can be illuminatingly introduced into any and every moral act” (SOG 41). Thus each one of her readers is called to wrestle with his or her own rich and descriptive understanding of the good.

I think this is where Murdoch’s ideas about the ongoing cultivation of an attentive sensibility are so important. If I gage the success of my attentive practice on these encounters with others on my daily commute as a completed exercise, I do not think I
have been successful. And yet, in deliberately turning my attention away from myself, I think I am engaging in a practice that builds an ethical vocabulary. In looking at my fellow commuters with attention, I’ve learned a little more about who they are. I noticed that Guy Smiley was wearing a brand new bright yellow cycling jacket in January, which suggests that someone who loves him bought it for him for Christmas. I saw Crazy Lady With the Dogs smiling and chatting with a friend walking alongside her scooter. I’ve learned that BC Hydro Guy is actually a science teacher who lives in my neighbourhood. And the gleam in Old Timer’s eye suggests that perhaps he is as happy to see me, as I am to see him. I think these specific examples are important; they enrich my ethical imagination and show me that these “others” are not so different from me. We are all complex and simple at the same time - we need friends and people who love us, we long to be understood, we seek connection. The more examples of our common humanity we open ourselves up to see, the more likely we are to practice compassion.

The challenge, as Murdoch sees it, is in the words we use to describe ethical concepts. She observes,

Moral language which relates to a reality infinitely more complex and various than that of science is often unavoidably idiosyncratic and inaccessible...Words are the most subtle symbols which we possess and our human fabric depends on them. The living and radical nature of language is something which we forget at our peril. (SOG 33)

Murdoch’s response to the imprecision of ethical language is to build up a wealth of qualitative descriptions of what goodness is like, or as Murdoch calls it, “a rich and diversified vocabulary for naming aspects of goodness” (SOG 56). She considers the example of courage,

If we reflect on courage and ask why we think it to be a virtue, what kind of courage is the highest, what distinguishes courage from rashness, ferocity, self-assertion and so-on, we are bound, in our explanation, to use the names of other virtues. The best kind of courage (that which would make a man act unselfishly in a concentration camp) is steadfast, calm, temperate, intelligent loving...This may not in fact be exactly the right description, but it is the right sort of description. (SOG 56)

Thus we grow an ethical vocabulary through examples and story. This greatly diminishes the significance of an isolated moment of making a difficult ethical choice.
Instead, the practice of attention builds ethical resources to draw from in a moment of choice. For Murdoch, a qualitative description of this good is a necessary task of ethics. She points out,

> Of course right action is important in itself, with an importance which is not difficult to understand. But it should provide the starting-point of reflection and not its conclusion….Without some more positive conception of the soul as a substantial and continually developing mechanism of attachments, the purification and reorientation of which must be the task of morals, ‘freedom’ is readily corrupted into self-assertion and ‘right action’ into some sort of ad hoc utilitarianism. (SOG 69)

Thus for Murdoch, the aim of morality is not simply action – it is to deepen the quality of ethical concepts that inform our choices. She observes, “we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over” (SOG 36). This is because the nature of ethical work is the continual accumulation of a wealth of qualitative concepts – the choices flow from this rich sense of what the good looks like. It is a never-ending task.

**The Issue of Relativism**

In his introduction to *Gravity and Grace*, Weil’s personal friend Gustave Thibon references her view of attention without discrimination. He quotes her declaration that, “We must be indifferent to good and evil, really indifferent; that is to say, we must turn the light of attention equally on each of them” (*Gravity and Grace* xxiii). Weil’s interest here seems to be the practice of attention rather than the nature of what one is attending to. It seems that she is suggesting that what is perceived as a result is not as important as looking outward. Murdoch expresses similar sentiments. For her, the practice of attention is also about turning outward, which builds the ethical development of the self and an awareness of others. But she does not offer any evaluative assessment about the quality of what one may see when one adjusts one’s gaze. Instead she only offers, “The direction of attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from self which reduces all to a false unity, towards the great surprising variety of the world” (SOG 65). What we see by looking away from ourselves may be delightful. But what if what we encounter is morally troubling? Murdoch writes, “The idea of a patient loving regard, directed upon a
person, a thing, a situation, presents the will not as unimpeded movement but as something very much more like ‘obedience”’ (SOG 39). What is she suggesting that we ought to be obedient to? Is our only ethical allegiance to see the reality of the world beyond ourselves? Are we ethically bound to take any other action? These were questions that I considered in light of current events, and wrote about in the following reflection.

**Rat Killer II – July 2011**

So it was the morning after the Vancouver hockey riots and I ran over another rat on my bicycle. I am the only person I know who has had this experience – and it’s happened to me twice! What does this mean?

Once again, running over a rat was highly jarring. I let out a prolonged guttural squeal/bellow and a shudder of disgust as the rat dashed out of the bushes right between my wheels. I instantly acquired an unwelcome audience of bystanders who hadn’t seen the rat and probably thought that I was insane.

Somehow running over the rat seemed oddly appropriate for that particular morning. I was so upset by the destruction of the night before and I still can’t reconcile it with the beauty of that day. In paying deliberate attention to nature on my bike rides, I had until that point been thinking about natural beauty as a source of sustenance and contentment. Inspired by Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, I had felt like I was uncovering some sort of natural source of ethics – a sense that implicit in paying attention to the beauty that surrounds us is the obligation to behave in such a way that is harmonious rather than harmful.

Upon first seeing the images of the riots therefore, some of my first thoughts were through the lens of attention. While I understand and got swept up in the energy and excitement of the hockey games, the destructive response to the loss seemed to me to be a result of not paying attention, particularly to the natural world. How could they smash and burn the city on such a beautiful day? What kind of emptiness creates a void to be filled with such determination to destroy?

The riots were distressing for so many reasons. The stark contrast with pro-democracy demonstrations in Egypt and Syria and the increasingly obvious fact that the Vancouver rioters were fairly typical young people (rather than the so-called rare and dangerous anarchist fringe) led to many condemnations of the rioters as spoiled, entitled and even poorly-parented. I read a variety of responses and interpretations, including a theory that the riots were an expression of the latent frustration of a bleak economic future in such an expensive city, that they were the inevitable
result of a city-sponsored overly large drunk crowd, that they were a reflection of the implicit violence of hockey.

My initial diagnosis was that the rioters and bystanders who did nothing were suffering from the same condition – a profound lack of attention to the world outside of themselves, a kind of hyper-selfishness. Even with the perspective afforded by time passing, I do think the riots offer a glimpse into a human condition similar to that described by Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch – namely a propensity for distraction, a tendency to follow the path of least resistance, a sense of ourselves as the centre of the universe.

Now with the benefit of time and distance, I find myself reconsidering my own judgment of the situation. Rather than saying, “the rioters ought to have paid attention, their lack of attention was their ethical downfall,” I wonder if it is possible to pay attention without judgment. Is this what Weil and Murdoch meant by being present with what is – even when that thing is repugnant to us? What does it actually mean to pay attention to those who chose to become involved in the riots? Is it to abstain from condemning their behaviour? Are Weil and Murdoch advocating moral relativism? Is there some sort of passivity implied in paying attention?

I do not think that Weil and Murdoch were ethical relativists. Surely their reliance on a Platonic sense of an external ideal form of goodness is not compatible with relativism. If it is naturally a good thing to pay attention (as an expression of a Platonic form of goodness), I think that it is logical to assume that it is naturally a good thing not to destroy one’s own city in a hockey riot. Besides, the very act of paying attention is itself an active denial of one’s own inherent selfishness and proclivity for distraction. There is certainly a quality of action that is a part of Weil and Murdoch’s idea of attention. Both thinkers put their theories into practice – Murdoch as a novelist and Weil as a political activist.

But what does it mean when what we pay attention to reveals something that is ethically troubling? What role does an attentive stance toward otherness play when we feel compelled to act in response to what we notice? Does attention demand action? Is the action of attention ethically sufficient?

My only response thus far is that I will continue to explore these questions – both on and off my bicycle. I just hope I don’t hit any more rats!

Although I do not think that Weil and Murdoch are ethical relativists, I do think it’s a worthy question for consideration. Simone Weil asserts, “we should have with each person the relationship of one conception of the universe to another conception of the universe, and not to a part of the universe” (Gravity and Grace 129). If I practice this
sort of invocation to attention; surely I will see that the other has a claim to understanding the nature of reality that is equally legitimate to mine. And if both of our claims are indeed valid, then what is Truth but a matter of perspective? For example, I am disgusted and upset by the senseless destruction of the hockey riots. But someone who participated in those riots may have felt the exhilaration of collectivity and the opportunity to release and express deep frustration. Who sees more truthfully? Is there one truth that is more accurate than another? As much as I feel as though those rioters were misguided, Weil’s ideas caution,

If we are to attend to others we must ‘transport’ ourselves to that centre of thought from which the other person reads values, resisting at all costs the temptations to impose or force our own point of view on others, even when we believe that point of view may be in their own best interest (Bowden 50 commenting on Weil’s *Human Personality* essay).

On the one hand, this sentiment implies an open-ness toward others that is highly appealing, as it resists judgment, facilitates understanding, and turns the gaze away from the self. But, when I consider this stance in light of a real-world example of something that seems self-evidently wrong, the all-seeing, non-judging eye of attention is more troubling.

Many of Murdoch’s ideas have equally relativistic qualities. For example, in her description of the moral life as an ongoing project, she talks about how we come to understand ethical concepts over time. One concept may have many meanings to us at different times in our lives. We may also grow to see something that we had previously ignored or dismissed to be ethically significant. She says that the good must be understood,

in relation to the progressive life of a person. The active ‘reassessing’ and ‘redefining’ which is a main characteristic of live personality often suggests and demands a checking procedure which is a function of an individual history. Repentance may mean something different to an individual at different times in his life, and what it fully means is a part of this life and cannot be understood except in context. (SOG 25)

The question that arises in my mind from this example is about the virtue of repentance itself – does it have an essential quality? Is Murdoch suggesting that
repentance or other virtues have their own particular meanings to each of us as a result of our own personal experience and therefore cannot be said to have any meaning outside of context?

Certainly Weil and Murdoch’s use of the Platonic Forms counters the relativistic qualities of their ideas. These forms set both a referent and criteria for goodness, and attention is the self-denying practice that enables one to see the Truth. For Murdoch, the role of this Goodness is to be a “source of light [which] reveals to us all things as they really are” (SOG 68). In other words, “Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality” (SOG 87). Weil claims,

The longing in the depth of the heart for absolute good, and the power, though only latent, of directing attention and love to a reality beyond the world and of receiving good from it – constitutes a link which attaches every man without exception to that other reality. (Springstead Reader 134)

Thus for Murdoch and Weil, the shift of the gaze from self to other through the practice of attention reveals Goodness, and this Goodness is the arbiter of the quality of our choices. It is an external referent. But for Weil, and Murdoch especially, Goodness is not a static, one-dimensional, hazy ideal. It is a dynamic living thing. Ethical concepts grow to have meaning through experience and struggle – they become personal and relevant. Murdoch describes, “a process of deepening or complicating, a process of learning, a progress which may take place in moral concepts in the dimension which they possess in virtue of their relation to an ideal limit” (SOG 31, emphasis added). Here Murdoch shows that in spite of the spectrum of meaning that a single ethical concept may hold for each one of us, that meaning still defers to an outside ideal. For Murdoch, the use of that ideal is conceptually helpful, although very difficult to grasp. She writes, “The image of the Good as a transcendent magnetic centre seems to me the least corruptible and most realistic picture for us to use in our reflections on the moral life… But it is easier to look at the converging edges than to look at the centre itself” (SOG 73, 97). Thus the elusive and contextually-determined definition of what the Good is, requires specific and particular examples. We come to know the Good by gathering a collection of stories of things and actions that are Good. But the over-arching concept of “the Good” unites these contextual examples which in turn forms a necessarily rich and
complex sense of Goodness. This forms a strong ethical resource to draw from. She writes,

The authority of the Good seems to us something necessary because realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of self. In this treating realism, whether of artist or of agent, as a moral achievement, there is of course a further assumption to be made in the field of morals: that true vision occasions right conduct.” (SOG 64)

Thus Murdoch holds that an external concept of the Good is a necessary anchor for ethics. It is the foundation of right action in the world.

There are other clear and unambiguous indications from both Weil and Murdoch that Goodness is not relative. Murdoch concedes that developing a qualitative wealth of descriptions to make meaning of an ethical concept does not mean that this will necessarily translate into right action. She writes, “a smart set of concepts may be a most efficient instrument of corruption” (SOG 32). Again, the ideal of Goodness provides crucial external criteria. We may build up a rich descriptive ethical vocabulary, but the quality or “rightness” of our understanding is still subject to external judgment.

More straightforwardly, Weil claims that when we look with attention, “the good will triumph by automatic phenomenon” (Gravity and Grace xxiii). This demonstrates Weil’s deference to an external ideal and her sense that Goodness, by nature, has its own fundamental and indisputable value.

At the end of the day, Murdoch’s common-sensical approach is for me the clearest way of understanding the apparent contradictions between the universal and the particular in the Weilian/Murdochian realm of ethics. She writes,

The ordinary person does not, unless corrupted by philosophy, believe that he creates values by his choices. He thinks that some things really are better than others and that he is capable of getting it wrong. We are not usually in doubt about the direction in which Good lies. Equally we recognize the real existence of evil: cynicism, cruelty, indifference to suffering. (SOG 95)
Thus for Murdoch (and for Weil), good and evil are real rather than relative concepts. An understanding of what good and evil are, is determined by a qualitative exploration of what things are Good and what things are evil. When it comes time to make a choice, the habitual objects of our attention determine what we decide to do. Murdoch writes, "we act rightly 'when the time comes' not out of strength of will but out of the quality of our usual attachments and with the kind of energy and discernment which we have available. And to this the whole activity of our consciousness is relevant" (SOG 89). Thus the moral life is the fruit of our day-to-day being in the world.
Chapter 4.

Paying Attention to the Natural World

I turn now to a specific technique in directing the gaze from self to other, namely paying attention to the natural world. Weil and Murdoch each see attention to nature as an undeniably good thing – the benefits of which are perfectly obvious. Simone Weil boldly declares,

To pay no attention to the world’s beauty is, perhaps, so great a crime of ingratitude that it deserves the punishment of affliction. To be sure, it does not always get it; but then the alternative punishment is a mediocre life, and in what way is a mediocre life preferable to affliction? (Selected Writings 71)

Similarly, Murdoch says “It is so patently a good thing to take delight in flowers and animals that people who bring home potted plants and watch kestrels might even be surprised at the notion that these things have anything to do with virtue” (SOG 83).

Clearly for both thinkers, attention to nature has ethical implications – its value is self-evident.

To look beyond the self with attention is to see more than other people – it is also to bear witness to the other-than-human world. For Weil and Murdoch this is an ethical activity, a deliberate antidote to human selfishness. This human condition, as Murdoch describes, is one in which “…fantasy (self) can prevent us from seeing a blade of grass just as it can prevent us from seeing another person” (SOG 68). This condition requires an ethical remedy, a re-focusing of the gaze away from the self. Murdoch terms this process one of “unselfing” (SOG 82). She observes,

The appreciation of beauty in art or nature is not only (for all its difficulties) the easiest available spiritual exercise; it is also a completely adequate entry into (and not just analogy of) the good life, since it is the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real (SOG 63).
Thus attention to nature is a spiritual practice, a means of seeing beyond self-interest to the Truth. This resulting reality features both human and non-human others. To see the other is to live the good life, as for Weil and Murdoch an acquaintance with reality is an expression of Goodness. Attention to nature also contextualizes the individual; it illuminates a bigger picture, it is humbling. Murdoch’s famous encounter with the kestrel is the best example of the potential for nature to “un-self.” She says,

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 (SOG 83).

In this account, a glimpse of nature serves to re-direct the focus from self to something outside of the self. It shifts the relentlessly self-preoccupied gaze to an awareness of an external reality. Therefore the spiritual lesson of an encounter with nature is the same as paying attention to the independent existence of another person - it is the re-focusing of our vision from self to other.

Deliberately paying attention to the natural world has been one of my own experiments with attention. The Appendix contains several photographs that capture particular moments of my daily cycle commute across the seasons of a school year. (A selection of all of my photographs can be found at http://www.flickr.com/photos/oneyearcycle/) This exercise has drawn my gaze to the infinitesimal shifts and changes in qualities of light, wind and temperature that are present in a single day. I have also borne witness to cycles of growth, death and re-birth over time as the seasons blend into one another. I have been humbled by my own vulnerability to wet and cold. I am more attuned to my very small place within the age-old rhythms of an expansive natural context. I have traveled an east-west route with the crows. Certainly this has in part been an experiment in “unselfing,” as my senses are flooded with the sounds, smells and sights of that which is not who I am. This refocusing continues to lead my gaze outward from my self. Paying attention to the natural world has also enriched my conceptual and ethical vocabulary, as I continue to accumulate a
wealth of ways to describe what the natural world is like. I see this as an extension of Murdoch’s insight that the moral life is an intentional re-direction of one’s attention in order to build a rich and descriptive vocabulary of Goodness. Certainly attending to nature is a way of facilitating a process of un-selfing. But I think that it is also a way of coming to understand the nature and value of that which is not me, and that is the other-than-human world. In other words – what is nature like? And why does it matter?

There is a rich and beautiful body of work that seeks to give voice to an experience of nature. For example, the writer Annie Dillard marvels at the intricacies of nature’s minutiae in her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Artists such as Ansel Adams and Andy Goldsworthy use mediums of photography and living sculpture respectively to draw our attention to the ethereal and majestic beauty of natural cycles and landforms. Gary Snyder, Aldo Leopold, John Muir, Rachel Carson and other writers explore the spiritually nourishing qualities of nature in their poems and essays. Deep ecologists engage in an ongoing-project of noticing and describing intrinsic value in nature, one that seeks to find eco-centric rather than anthropocentric ways of being.¹⁷ I understand all of these endeavours to be contributions to a rich and qualitative description of the natural world. For Murdoch, a well-developed vocabulary of Goodness provides a wealth of resources to draw from when the time comes to make an ethical choice. As Weil and Murdoch both see attention to nature as self-evidently Good, certainly an accumulation of descriptive vocabulary acquired through attention to nature builds an ethical foundation useful to the human relationship with the natural world. Weil and Murdoch did not set

¹⁷ For further reading on Deep Ecology (the name for a theoretical position and environmental movement first attributed to Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess after the publication of his 1973 paper entitled *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements*), see the 1985 book by Bill Devall and George Sessions entitled *Deep Ecology*. Central tenets of Deep Ecology include a belief in the intrinsic value of all human and non-human life and the right of all forms of life to flourish, a celebration of natural richness and diversity as necessary conditions for flourishing, a belief that human interference in the natural world is excessive and worsening, and a call for radical changes to existing economic, technological and ideological structures. Ecological thinker Neil Evernden describes Deep Ecology saying, “It requires the individual to bear witness to his own personal experience of the world, even though that may be in conflict with social reality, and even though it risks ridicule from the majority” (Evernden, 29). Some of the thinkers associated with Deep Ecology include Warwick Fox, Thomas Berry, Fritjof Capra and Freya Matthews.
out to elucidate a theory of environmental ethics explicitly. However, their insistence on ethical activity as a shift of attention from self to other requires one to “see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world” (SOG 91). Looking with attention shifts the solipsistic viewpoint and opens up the heart and mind to the reality of others. When we look with this kind of attention, we see the other for “who they are for themselves, not how we would prefer, assume or fantasize them to be” (*Worldly Indifference* 25).18 The quality of this attention is “just and loving” (SOG 33) and shows us a complete picture of reality. Thus the other is not an object in the service of our selfish ego and agenda. Instead, the other has intrinsic value; they are not a means to any other end. Certainly this other-directedness is an underlying condition of environmental ethics. Mick Smith contends that attention to the natural world as an extension of attention to other people (as defined by Weil and Murdoch) opens up, “an enlarged field of ethical responsibilities” (*Worldly Indifference* 25). In his argument, Smith highlights the action that is implicit in Murdoch’s view of attention saying,

Attending selflessly to ‘how the world is’ is intimately connected to, indeed inseparable from, attending to ‘how we should respond to the world.’ That is, to succeed in acting ethically toward someone entails having seen them as they really are (*Worldly Indifference* 25).

Smith describes the world as seen through the eyes of an attentive observer to be “indifferent,” meaning that its existence or value is in no way defined according to our own selfish interests. He also observes that this stance is in opposition to a prevailing ethic of self-referentiality:

For Murdoch, recognizing this “indifferent” environment in no way forces us to accept those dominant modernist cultural and philosophical forms where the human self is portrayed as the sole remaining source and measure of ethical values.” (*Worldly Indifference* 25)

18 See Mick Smith’s article “World (In)Difference and Ecological Ethics: Iris Murdoch and Emmanuel Levinas” in *Environmental Ethics* Environmental Ethics, Vol. 29, Spring 2007, pgs. 23 – 41 for his discussion of the themes of intrinsic value and the recognition and preservation of difference and diversity in Murdoch’s thought. His analysis argues for the significance of Murdoch’s contribution to a sense of “worldly indifference” that he contends is an underlying precursor to ecological ethics.
Indeed Murdoch’s theory of attention is in part an expression of her criticism of existentialism’s emphasis on the moment of choice as the ethical activity. Implicit in her assessment of the insufficiency of this emphasis to the moral life is a larger criticism of the ethical inadequacies of modernity – a stance she has in common with the Romantic poets, the Frankfurt School, and many environmental philosophers.¹⁹

Murdoch’s ethical critique of her contemporary circumstances is centred on her sense of a woefully scarce ethical vocabulary stemming from a climate of instrumental rationality and lacking a set of well-developed external ethical resources. She describes what she calls “the Kantian man” as what this ethically impoverished human being looks like:

Free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of moral philosophy…He is the offspring of the age of science, confidently rational and yet increasingly unaware of his alienation from the material world which his discoveries reveal (SOG 78).

In describing this Kantian man as alienated from the material world, Murdoch’s critique of his ethical poverty resounds with those of ecological philosophers who are similarly concerned with the real-world consequences of the modern condition of the human separation from and instrumentalization of nature. These philosophers pay particularly

¹⁹ “Modernity” is a broad and elusive term that is often used to describe the conditions of our current political, sociological, philosophical and ideological situation. This is a word and concept that has different meanings to different theorists, some arguing that our current time is better described as post-modern. “Modernity” is associated with Western Civilization, although its course of development has been used, controversially, to assess the “progress” of non-Western nations. What most definitions of modernity have in common is a sense that it is linked to the rise of an increasingly industrialized and urbanized capitalist economy in place of feudalism and associated with the values of rational science, secularism and the mechanization of nature. It reflects many of the Enlightenment ideals, including reason, individual rights and the notion of progress. Stephen Duguid summarizes what he calls the “interlocking components” that led to this condition as: “a growing conviction that humans were unique and qualitatively separate from the rest of the natural world; an increasing faith and reliance on reason and a corresponding mistrust of feeling; the development of powerful sciences and technologies based on an increasingly instrumentalized reason; and an accompanying ideology of progress” (Duguid 119).
close attention to the environmental consequences of what they call modernity’s “mastery agenda” over nature, one they characterize as exploitative and dominating.20

In particular, a central focus of many ecological thinkers has been the primacy of instrumental reason in modernity. Charles Taylor describes instrumental reason as, “the kind of rationality we draw on when we calculate the most economical application of means to a given end” (qtd. in Duguid 119). This is reminiscent of Weil’s critique of the instrumentalism of her own contemporary climate. She said, “Utility becomes something which the intelligence is no longer entitled to define or to judge, but only to serve. From being the arbiter, intelligence becomes the servant” (qtd. in Morgan 111). When the value of something is calculated in terms of its usefulness to a pre-determined end, its intrinsic value is lost. In other words, when something is the subject of instrumental reason, a sense of its value in and for itself is overtaken by its utility to a specific end. Mick Smith points out that the “constrictive coils of our culture” regard nature instrumentally, which is “as a resource whose meaning and value lies only in its potential for human transformation and use” (Worldly Indifference 24). Coupled with a belief in the scientific method as the way to uncover “truth” about the world, a sense of the value of the subject (in this case, nature) is forsaken in favour of knowledge – it is de-mystified. Duguid describes this method as:

one which purged the truth-seekers of all subject-relative properties such as beauty, utility, goodness, colour, and smell… ‘in order to isolate the properties that are essential to the thing as it is in itself – namely the features of a thing that can be quantified such as mass, velocity and position.’ (Duguid 120)

In other words, modern science is characterized by a division between facts, (that which can be discovered empirically), and values (qualitative properties). Iris

20 This ecological critique is best summed up by Mick Smith who writes, “In terms of ‘progress,’ environmentalism, like many other radical movements, tells a different ‘history.’ Rather than extolling the virtues of that continual linear advancement supposedly brought on by technological mastery and human ingenuity, it recalls the cost in human and environmental terms of each ‘advance.’ Its anamnesic critique reminds us of that cultural and environmental holocaust which has dogged modernity’s passage and the fate of those communities from the Mesopotamia to the Maya and from Easter Island to Three Mile Island, that fail to give due regard to their environs (Ethics of Place 71).
Murdoch writes, “Value does not belong inside the world of …science and factual propositions” (SOG 57). Ecological theorist Neil Evernden employs the startling and emotionally evocative image of the vivisectionist to describe this kind of science as one that requires the practitioner to “sever the vocal chords of the world” (Evernden 17). As an alternative, he describes the environmentalist as one who bears witness to a direct, felt, lived experience in the real world saying,

Instead of accepting beliefs that trivialize the experience of living and assert the reality of a valueless world, the environmentalist is urged to attest to his own experience of a meaningful, valuable, colourful world. Environmentalism, like Romanticism before it, is essentially a ‘protest on behalf of value.’ (Evernden 33)

Thus the environmentalist introduces a sense of meaning and value in nature to what is missing from what Evernden calls “the official maps of reality” (Evernden 26).21

The environmentalist so defined turns his/her gaze to the natural world and attests to a personal experience of it. This telling reflects and responds to a cultural vacuum, namely an inadequate vocabulary to describe the intrinsic value of the other-than-human world. By introducing this kind of value-laden speech into a discourse dominated by the language of instrumental reason and quantifiable utility (see footnote on modernity), the tools for describing the value of nature in and for itself are enriched. This is where the project/aim of the environmentalist intersects with Weil and Murdoch’s theory of attention. What unites them is the other-directedness of their gaze, a contextual sense of self as existing along-side many others who possess an equal claim to being and value, and the seeking of intrinsic, rather than instrumental value in the other. Both the environmentalist (particularly as defined by Evernden) and the practitioner of Weil and Murdoch’s portrayal of attention, accumulate an abundant and fecund ethical vocabulary.

21 Both Evernden and David Abrams in The Natural Alien and The Spell of the Sensuous respectively, investigate phenomenology (as conceptualized by Heidegger, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and others) as a philosophical tool that gives a voice to a first-person direct encounter with the world. They argue for its applicability to the environmentalist’s project of attesting to the experience of value in the natural world.
Beauty in Nature

For Weil and Murdoch, in addition to its ethically instructive role in shifting the gaze from self to other, an experience in nature (just as an encounter with art) can lead to a profound and moving experience of beauty. This beauty is not the inevitable reward of attention however; it is an indicator of Goodness. Murdoch describes this saying, “beauty appears as the visible and accessible aspect of the Good” (EM 348). We are, as Murdoch says, drawn to beauty because “beauty is the only thing we love by instinct” (EM 30). The quality of that beauty however, is not of the instrumental kind. Weil says, “A beautiful thing involves no good except itself, in its totality, as it appears to us” (Waiting for God 169). For if we measure the value of natural beauty by the weight of its impact on our experience of enjoyment, that beauty is still a means to an end, even if that end is human peace and pleasure. Evernden describes this as turning beauty into an object or “simply another resource” (Evernden 24). In contrast, Weil and Murdoch describe natural beauty as intrinsically valuable in and for itself. This beauty exists for its own sake and is not a means to any other end than itself. It has its own value. Weil observes,

Beauty is the supreme mystery of this world. It is a gleam which attracts the attention and yet does nothing to sustain it. Beauty always promises, but never gives anything; it stimulates hunger but has no nourishment for the part of the soul which looks in this world for sustenance. It feeds only the part of the soul that gazes (Sian Anthology 93).

These sentiments are echoed in Murdoch’s view. She writes, “Beautiful things contain beauty in a way in which good acts do not exactly contain good, because beauty is partly a matter of the senses…the flower fades…but something has not suffered from death and mortality” (EM 348). Beauty, as a characteristic of the Good, has an intrinsic, eternal value.

When I first began this chapter, and indeed when I began to take photographs on my bike rides, I thought I would conclude with a declaration of the triumphant, intrinsic value of beauty, and in particular the beauty of nature as the fruit and reward of attention. But for Weil and Murdoch, it doesn’t end here, and this is precisely what is so insightful and challenging about what they have to say. For there is more to nature than
the beautiful (as I would most whole-heartedly agree in light of my unfortunate encounters with rats!) To truly look with attention is to accept the whole of reality – beautiful and otherwise. It is a stance that bears weighty implications. What follows is my personal reflection on this theme of their work.

Living with Reality - July 2011

After an amazing leisure ride the other day in the glorious sunshine, I came across this quotation which summed up the pleasure perfectly. It is from a book written by Jean Bobet entitled Tomorrow We Ride. He says:

“The voluptuous pleasure that cycling can give you is delicate, intimate, and ephemeral. It arrives, it takes hold of you, sweeps you up and then leaves you again. It is for you alone. It is a combination of speed and ease, force and grace. It is pure happiness.”

I like Bobet’s use of the word ‘ephemeral,’ as indeed those moments of effortless alignment between bicycle, self and environment are fleeting and precious. And as much as I try to create the conditions for such an experience, it is not something that can be conjured up. Instead, such harmonies feel more like an unbidden gift.

These ruminations remind me of something Simone Weil said. She calls her readers to look up and pay attention to that which is outside of our selves – not because this bears a reward or is a means to some other end or gain, but simply because it is the right thing to do. To do so is to be true to life and what it means to be alive on this inter-dependent planet. And to be alive is a beautiful thing. She observes in Gravity and Grace:

“Stars and blossoming fruit-trees: utter permanence and extreme fragility give an equal sense of fragility…The vulnerability of precious things is beautiful because vulnerability is a mark of existence” (Gravity and Grace 97).

For me, this in turn conjures up something Iris Murdoch had to say. She borrows a concept from Wittgenstein, commenting:

“A self-directed enjoyment of nature seems to me to be something forced. More naturally, as well as more properly, we take a self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals, birds,
I think what Weil and Murdoch are saying is that to pay attention is to be truthfully alive. And in spite of all of the injustice and pain and suffering that are part of being human – this life is all that there is. To pay attention is to observe without an agenda, judgment or expectation of personal gain; it is simply to be present with what is. Attention is an orientation, a stance toward otherness, an unceasing open-ness. It sounds deceptively simple. However, to attempt to practice Weil and Murdoch’s concept of attention is to meet my own human frailty and inadequacy head on – it is one of the most difficult things I can imagine.

To conclude this chapter, I return to Iris Murdoch’s invitation to attention as a necessary counter to our human tendency to avoid the painful truths of our existence. Our individual struggles are contextualized and perhaps even diminished when we turn our gaze away from ourselves to see that other people, who feel things just as intensely as we do, exist with just as much claim to truth as we do. If we extend this practice, intently and openly to the natural world, we may find an equally legitimate claim to existence and value. With time and discipline, Murdoch contends that the practice of attention grows a rich and meaningful ethical vocabulary, that is, a qualitative and accessible set of concepts that equip us in times of decision-making. To be honest about the contradictions and shortcomings in our own lives in the light of attention to a reality outside of ourselves is not something that we can do easily, if at all. Murdoch writes,

A simple-minded faith in science, together with the assumption that we are all rational and totally free, engenders a dangerous lack of curiosity about the real world, a failure to appreciate the difficulties.

22 This is Murdoch’s unacknowledged quotation of Wittengenstein found in Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. Mick Smith describes this as “his famous distinction between the world, defined in terms of descriptions of states of affairs (facts), and metaphysics, about which, he claims, nothing meaningful can be said…For Wittgenstein, the problem is that discussions of ethical values run up against the limits of linguistic expression: ‘In ethics we are always making the attempt to say something that cannot be said, something that does not and never will touch the essence of the matter. It is a priori certain that whatever definition of the good may be given – it will always be a misunderstanding to say that the essential thing, that what is really met, corresponds to what is expressed’” (Smith, 2007, 31).
of knowing it. We need to return from the self-centred concept of sincerity to the other-centred concept of truth. We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but beknighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy (EM 293, emphasis added).

To emphasize the difficulty of this task, I return to the person and ideas of Simone Weil, who in many ways is a less palpable and more forbidding figure than Iris Murdoch. She is staunchly uncompromising in her requirement for absolute self-denial in order to attend to an other. For Weil, and for Murdoch, this practice of attention is not a pre-packaged, all-inclusive code of behaviour. Instead, it is a relentlessly transformative ongoing way of being. It is painful and difficult and does not find comfort or reprieve in fantasy or a sense of successful completion. Weil herself entered directly into the reality of ever-present human suffering through almost incomprehensible acts of self-abnegation. In particular, several Weilian scholars identify food as the central metaphor in Simone Weil’s writing and life. They argue that her concept of attention is akin to being hungry but refusing to eat. It is looking (which has no closure), versus eating which satiates the appetite. These writers point out that Weil does not allow herself nourishing consolation – both theoretically and in her life. Instead, she dwells in the deeply uncomfortable reality of inconsolable human suffering. She dies, literally, hungry.

As Europe became increasingly dangerous in the years leading up to the Second World War, Simone Weil’s family re-located to New York City in 1942, and she joined them there for a brief time. The following statement is inscribed on the plaque beside the door of the house she inhabited. It is in her own words:

Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity. It is given to very few minds to notice that things and beings exist. Since my childhood I

23 See du Plessix Gray, pgs 163-165, Frost and Metereau, pgs 23-29, and Rozelle-Stone pgs 18-35 for elaboration. Weil herself commented, “to look and to eat are two different things. We have to choose one or the other. They are both called loving. The only people who have any hope of salvation are those who occasionally stop and look for a time, instead of eating” (qtd. in Rozelle-Stone 20).
have not wanted anything else but to receive the complete revelation of this before I die.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{24} Although this quotation is often repeated and attributed to Simone Weil, even inspiring a recent documentary about her life and ideas entitled “An Encounter with Simone Weil,” after an extensive search I was unable to find the original source. This citation came from an online discussion forum about architecture found at http://wirednewyork.com/forum/showthread.php?t=7935&page=2
Conclusion: A Return to Plato

Platonic thought and its subsequent impact on the trajectory of western civilization has been identified by many critics of modernity as the origin of many of our contemporary problems. They describe our cultural separation of mind from body, theory from practice, and real from the ideal and find the evidence for its genesis in Platonic ideas. In their discussion on materialism in the work of Simone Weil, Patterson and Schmidt describe this line of criticism:

The familiar caricature of Platonism as the otherworldly dualist, idealist, anticosmic and antimaterialist dominates and provides the straw man for much postmodern philosophy informed by the Heideggerian interpretations of Nietzsche and his epigones such as Derrida and Foucault (Patterson and Schmidt 77).

One of the key accusations against Platonism is its role in creating a world-denying metaphysics (which Murdoch called “concerned with abstruse otherworldly speculation” (SOG 93). Indeed, Patterson and Schmidt point out that according to Heidegger, “Metaphysics began with Plato’s separation of Being, the unchanging forms and ideas, from becoming, the changeable and the timely” (Patterson and Schmidt 77).

David Abrams discusses the impact of this type of metaphysical consciousness on the human relationship with nature, and the subsequent separation of nature from culture:

A long line of recent philosophers, stretching from Nietzsche down to the present have tried to demonstrate that Plato’s philosophical derogation of the sensible and changing forms of the world – his claim that these are mere simulacra of eternal and pure ideas existing in a nonsensorial realm beyond the apparent world – contributed profoundly to civilization’s distrust of bodily and sensorial experience, and to our consequent estrangement from the earthly world around us (Abrams 94).

The French historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot counters this interpretation, arguing that such an analysis is an anachronistic reading of Plato’s thought. He writes:
The problems, the themes, the symbols from which Western thought has developed were not all born, quite obviously, in the period that we have studied. But the west has received them for the most part in the form that was given to them either by Hellenistic thought, or by the adaptation of this thought to the Roman world, or by the encounter between Hellenism and Christianity (Hadot 2).

Hadot builds his case by re-visiting the concept and role of philosophy as it was conceived of and experienced by those living in the ancient world, saying that for the ancients, “philosophy proposed to mankind an art of living” (Hadot 272). Hadot characterizes the ancient understanding of philosophy to be “a living act, a unity of theory and action…a mode of existing in the world, which had to be practiced at each instant and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual’s way of being” (Hadot 265). Far from distinctly separate spheres of theory and practice, Hadot’s characterization of the ancient use of philosophy describes an ongoing inter-relationship between ideas and their enactment in an ongoing quest to know and understand the Good.

It is this contextual re-reading of ancient thought that resounds with how Weil and Murdoch use and understand the ideas of Plato. They use Platonic forms as conceptual anchors for a world-affirming practice of attention. Both thinkers describe the ongoing struggle to lead an ethical life as rooted in an earthly existence; it is set in the material world. Simone Weil writes,

The unreality of things, which Plato so powerfully depicts in the metaphor of the cave, has no connection with the things as such: the things in themselves have the fullness of reality in that they exist. It is a question of things as the object for love (qtd. in Patterson and Schmidt from Weil’s Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks 84).

Thus the real and living world is affirmed in her epistemology. The world matters. Weil writes, “To say that the world is not worth anything, that this life is of no value, and to give evil as the proof is absurd, for if these things are worthless what does evil take from us?” (Gravity and Grace, Preface xix) Patterson and Schmidt use this evidence to describe Weil’s thought as “Christian Materialism.” They describe this as Weil’s belief that:
Human life is not a ceaseless struggle to escape the prison of the world here below and rise to our true home in the pure and ordered reality of heaven. Rather the love of the Good that absolutely transcends the created order is evoked and sustained by the very created order it transcends (Patterson and Schmidt 84).

According to their characterization of Weil’s ideas, Patterson and Schmidt contend that the enactment of ethical ideas in the real world is crucial to the ethical life:

Wisdom is gained through leaving the cave of false perceptions in which we see and know things only superficially, according to their capacity to satisfy our own appetites and passions, and learn instead to see and know things as they are, on their own terms and according to their intrinsic purposes…Such true knowledge of the world brings with it an inescapable political obligation: in Plato’s terms, ‘the wise have to return to the cave and act there’ (Patterson and Schmidt 86).

This argument suggests that for Weil, engaged participation in the material world is absolutely essential for ethical understanding and growth.

Iris Murdoch is equally affirmative of the real world. Mick Smith calls her Platonism “radically non-metaphysical” (Worldly Indifference 27), while Tracey describes it as “strange and courageous” (Tracey 54). She appeals to the ideal of the Good as a necessary and accessible tool in the service of ethics. She also sees Goodness as a discernable reality. Murdoch writes, “Goodness is an idea, an ideal, yet is it also evidently and actively incarnate all around us” (MGM 478). David Tracey argues that Murdoch’s use of the Platonic dialogues is significant in both content and form. He uses Aristotle’s interpretation of the dialogues as “mime-like” to build an interpretation that the Platonic dialogues so conceived are “aporetic.” Similarly, Murdoch’s philosophical and fictional writing are set in the everyday, often unresolved struggles of everyday existence. He writes,

Iris Murdoch’s hope for the reunion of thought and exercise is not focused upon a Kantian abrupt call for the will to abide by duty or by a Kierkegaardian leap of faith or a radical transformation or conversion of the self from evil to good. Instead, her hope is directed to a slow shift of our attachments, a painstaking education of desire – an education like that which Plato foresaw as our best, perhaps our only, hope for both living and thinking well. Even metaphysics for her serves not only as an intellectual but a spiritual purpose, another great barrier against our
natural egoism. There is no shortcut to enlightenment.” (Search for Human Goodness 73)

Indeed Murdoch’s commitment to a Truthful existence led her to eschew the comfort offered by any of the world’s religions. For her, the danger of religion was that it could insulate a practitioner from reality. Tracey writes, “For her, a belief in God can function as another veil created by our anxiety to hide away what is terrible and absurd in life, and reality” (Search for Human Goodness 74). In this way, Murdoch is staunchly materialist, as for her:

Our destiny can be examined but it cannot be justified or totally explained. We are simply here. And if there is any sense of unity in human life, and the dream of this does not cease to haunt us, it is of some other kind and must be sought within a human experience which has nothing outside it. (SOG 77)

Rather than employing a religious God therefore, Murdoch uses the tool of the Platonic form of Goodness as a way of conceptualizing an ideal of the Good – the Good without God. Her use of the form of Goodness is not literal however; she employs it as a metaphorical concept. Smith argues that Murdoch’s use of Platonic metaphors is suited to her task of building an ethical vocabulary: “Murdoch believed that philosophy needed such metaphors and such conceptual schemes – metaphysics in this more mundane sense – in order to ask important ontological and ethical questions about what the world is like” (Worldly Indifference 29).

Indeed metaphor was critically important to Iris Murdoch – both philosophically and in her fictional writing. She writes, “Metaphors are not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models, they are fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition (SOG 75). For Murdoch, metaphor is an essential meaning-making tool. She declares, “we are creatures who use irreplaceable metaphors in many of our most important activities” (SOG 91). Murdoch goes on to say, “Metaphors can be a mode of understanding, and so of acting upon, our condition” (SOG 91). Platonic metaphors inspire Murdoch’s conceptual understanding of what the Good is, which in turn requires the ethical practice of attention in the real world. This practice takes place in our everyday life.
Closing Thoughts

And so, as I conclude this journey with attention, I return to Weil and Murdoch’s use of the Platonic form of Goodness. As I have briefly discussed here, rather than possessing a hazy, other-worldly metaphysical quality, their use of the Good is grounded in the tangible, living Earth. The Platonic form of the Good is essential to both thinker’s theories of ethics, as Weil and Murdoch use the concept as a tool to name and describe what Murdoch calls, “indescribable” (SOG 96). Attention is the requisite practice; we approximate Goodness when we choose to look outside of our selves with a just and loving gaze. A rich and thick description of our efforts and what we see constitutes an accessible ethical vocabulary. For Weil and Murdoch, what we see when we look with attention is nothing short of Truth itself – it is a glimpse of an indifferent (to us) reality. That is all there is.

Certainly there is a quality of bleakness to this glimpse of Truth. Weil and Murdoch are unyielding in their requirement for honesty about reality; they dismiss any forms of consolation from the fact of our mortal, fragile existence. Instead Murdoch observes, “We are what we seem to be; transient mortal creatures…The world is aimless, chancy and huge, and we are blinded by self” (SOG 77, 97). Our work is cut out for us; Murdoch writes, “It is a task to come to see the world as it is” (SOG 89). But there is also joy to be found in our brief time on this planet. Attention to reality also entails noticing and cherishing those precious things that bring meaning to our lives. I know that my own life has been enriched by my efforts to pay attention to the human and natural world that encircles me. In this spirit, I end with these words of Simone Weil:

If this be my last day – as in the Iliad for so many of its characters – the beauty of the sunset or the beauty of family, friends, life itself is more intense and beautiful than ever (qtd. from Weil in The Impossible 237).
Works Cited


Appendix.

One Year Cycle Photos

The Road Less Travelled

Misty Morning Lake

Heading Home With the Crows

Lit up
Trying to Capture it

Benediction

Cracks

Go East
Tenacity

Light the Way Home

Turned-Around Sky

Return of the Green
Pink

Sakura Street

Vancouver Spring

Verdant