



Attention in Iris Murdoch (1919–1999)

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Attention is one of the central concepts in Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy, connected with the possibility of just (moral) perception and a simultaneous reduction in self-concerned distortions (which Murdoch calls 'fantasy'). Murdoch's main source for the idea of attention is Simone Weil.

Murdoch famously describes attention as a 'just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality' (1970: 34). Attention is *loving*, in the sense of Plato's eros, insofar as it is animated by the desire to see the object as it is, not trying to change it, hence also informed by the aspiration toward the good; and it is *just*, because Murdoch's realism requires that we see reality not so much with detached accuracy, but with an engaged, both rational and affective attitude, which alone can yield truthful vision. Attention, then, is intimately linked with other concepts: love, reality, justice and unselfing. Unselfing means the ability to direct energy and focus toward reality, away from the greedy self (1970: 66).

Attention is an effort, something that we can try to do with difficulty, because we are more naturally inclined toward fantasy and reverie. But attention is also a negative kind of effort, because it involves allowing the reality we perceive to make an impression on us, putting our pre-conceptions, desires, hopes, and fears aside. It is a form of receptivity, which is both active and passive, and which can last for a second but also influences our inner life in the long term, because what we attend to contributes to shaping our consciousness: what we notice, what we neglect, the way we perceive situations etc. Hence attending is both something we can do, as well as an attitude we take and, sometimes, something that is grabbed from us, as when a sudden flutter of wings outside the window pulls us out of brooding reverie (1970: 84).

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