

What Does It Mean to See Someone Clearly?

Seattle Applied Wisdom Lab

Tuesday, July 21, 2026

Introduction

Many of us think of moral growth as becoming better at making decisions or acting according to our values. Iris Murdoch (1919–1999), one of the most important moral philosophers of the twentieth century, suggests something rather different. She argues that one of the deepest forms of moral growth may occur not through outward action at all, but through learning to see another person more clearly.

The excerpt for this session centers on a simple story about a mother (M) who initially views her daughter-in-law (D) with hostility and condescension. Over time, M comes to recognize that many of her judgments were shaped by jealousy, pride, and prejudice. Nothing about D changes. M's outward behavior remains courteous throughout. What changes is M's way of seeing.

Murdoch's question is deceptively simple:

Can learning to see another person more justly be a genuine moral achievement?

That question opens onto broader ones. If moral growth can occur entirely within a person's inner life, what kind of activity is it? What prevents us from seeing other people clearly in the first place? Is wisdom primarily a matter of making better choices, or of paying better attention?

As you read, don't worry about understanding every philosophical point. Instead, keep returning to the example itself. Ask yourself:

- What, if anything, changes in M?
- Why might that change have moral significance?
- Have you ever experienced a similar shift in how you saw another person?
- If so, what made that change possible?

The required reading is a five-page excerpt from *The Idea of Perfection*. I've also included a [link to the complete essay](#) for anyone interested in reading Murdoch's broader argument and the philosophical context in which it was written.

Excerpt from “The Idea of Perfection”

By Iris Murdoch

If you would like additional context, the full essay can be found [here](#).

For purposes of the rest of this discussion it will be useful to have an example before us: some object which we can all more or less see, and to which we can from time to time refer. All sorts of different things would do for this example, and I was at first tempted to take a case of *ritual*, for instance a religious ritual wherein the inner consent appears to be the real act. Ritual: an outer framework which both occasions and identifies an inner event. It can be argued that I make a promise by uttering the words “I promise”: a performative utterance. But do I, in a religious context, repent by sincerely uttering the words “I repent,” am I “heartily sorry” simply by saying in an appropriate situation that I am heartily sorry? Is this so even if I then amend my life? This is not so clear and is indeed a difficult and interesting question. I decided however not to take a religious example, which might be felt to raise special difficulties, but to take something more ordinary and everyday. So here is the example.

A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tirelessly juvenile. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him. Let us assume for purposes of the example that the mother, who is a very “correct” person, behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way. We might underline this aspect of the example by supposing that the young couple have emigrated or that D is now dead: the point being to ensure that whatever is in question as *happening* happens entirely in M's mind.

Thus much for M's first thoughts about D. Time passes, and it could be that M settles down with a hardened sense of grievance and a fixed picture of D, imprisoned (if I may use a question-begging word) by the cliché: my poor son has married a silly vulgar girl. However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: “I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.” Here I assume that M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters. If we take D to be now absent or dead this can make it clear that the change is not in D's behavior but in M's mind. D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on. And as I say, *ex hypothesi* M's outward behavior, beautiful from the start, in no way alters.

I used above words such as “just” and “intelligent” which implied a favorable value judgment on M's activity: and I want in fact to imagine a case where one would feel approval of M's change of view. But of course in real life, and this is of interest, it might be very hard to decide whether what M was doing was proper or not, and opinions might differ. M might be moved by various motives: a sense

of justice, attempted love for D, lover for her son, or simply reluctance to think of him as unfortunate or mistaken. Some people might say "she deludes herself" while others would say she was moved by love or justice. I am picturing a case where I would find the latter description appropriate.

What *happens* in this example could of course be described in other ways. I have chosen to describe it simply in terms of the substitution of one set of normative epithets for another. It could also be described, for instance, in terms of M's visual imagery, or in simple or complex metaphors. But let us consider now what exactly "it" is which is being described. It may be argued that there is nothing here which presents any special difficulty. For purposes of moral judgment we may define "actions" in various ways. One way in this case would be to say that M decided to behave well to D and did so; and M's private thoughts will be unimportant and morally irrelevant. If however it is desired to include in the list of M's moral acts more than her overt behavior shows, one will have to ask of the extra material: in what sense "moral" and in what sense "acts"? Of course if M's reflections were the prologue to *different* outer acts, then the reflections might be allowed to "belong" to the acts as their "shadows" and gain from them their identity and their importance: though the difficulty of discerning the inward part and connecting it with the outer as a condition of the latter could still be considerable. But what are we to say in the present case?

Hampshire tells us: "Thought cannot be thought as opposed to day-dreaming or musing, unless it is directed towards a conclusion, whether in action or in judgment.... The idea of thought as an interior monologue ... will become altogether empty if the thought does not even purport to be directed towards its issue in the external world.... Under these conditions thought and belief would not differ from the charmed and habitual rehearsal of phrases or the drifting of ideas through the mind." Let us exclude from this discussion something which might at this point try to enter it, which is the eye of God. If M's mental events are not to depend for being and importance upon this metaphysical witness, do we want to, and if so how can we, rescue them from the fate of being mere nothings, at best describable as day-dreams?

It would be possible of course to give a *hypothetical* status to M's inner life, as follows. "M's vision of D has altered *means* that *if* M were to speak her mind about D now she would say different things from the things she would have said three years ago." This analysis avoids some difficulties but, like phenomenalism, encounters others. The truth of the hypothetical proposition could be consistent with nothing in the interim having occurred in M's mind at all. And of course a change of mind often does take the form of the simple announcement of a new view without any introspectible material having intervened. But here *ex hypothesi* there is at least something introspectable which has occurred, however hazy this may be, and it is the status of this which is in question. At any rate the idea which we are trying to make sense of is that M has in the interim been *active*, she has been *doing* something, something which we approve of, something which is somehow worth doing in itself. M has been morally active in the interim: this is what we want to say and to be philosophically permitted to say.

At this point the defender of what I have called the existentialist-behaviorist view may argue as follows. All right. Either M has no introspectible material, in which case since M's conduct is constant it is hard to see what could be meant by saying that she had changed her mind, other than saying that a hypothetical proposition is true which no one could know to be true; or else M has introspectible material and let us see what this might be like. M may imagine saying things to D, may verbally describe D in her mind, may brood on visual images of D. But what do these goings-on mean? What is to count here as serious judgment as opposed to "the charmed and habitual rehearsal of phrases"? M's introspectabilia are likely on examination to prove hazy and hard to describe; and even if (at best) we imagine M as making clear verbal statements to herself, the identity and meaning of these statements is a function of the public world. She can only be thought of as "speaking" seriously, and not parrot-like, if the outer context logically permits.

The point can also be made, it may be said in parenthesis, that the identity of inward thoughts is established via the public meaning of the symbolism used in thinking. (See e.g. Ayer, *Thinking and Meaning*.) This should refute claims to "ineffable experience" etc. Philosophers have more recently chosen to emphasize the "shadow" view, that is to consider the particular sense of the thought via context rather than the general sense of the thought via symbols. But I think the points are worth separating. They represent two complementary pictures of the "self" or "will" as outside the network of logical rules, free to decide where to risk its tyranny, but thereafter caught in an impersonal complex. I can decide what to say but not what the words mean which I have said. I can decide what to do but I am not master of the significance of my act.

Someone who says privately or overtly "I have decided" but who never acts, however favorable the circumstances (the existentialist-behaviorist argument continues), has not decided. Private decisions which precede public actions may be thought of as the "shadow" of the act, gaining their title from being part of a complex properly called "decision": though even here the term "decision" if applied to the inner part only would be a courtesy title since there is no check upon the nature or existence of the inner part and its connection with the outer. Still, that is the situation in which we innocuously and popularly speak of "private decisions" or "inner acts," i.e., where some kind of outer structure is present and we may if we like picture, perhaps we naturally picture, an inner piece too. In M's case, however, since there is no outward alteration of structure to correspond to an alleged inner change, no sequence of outer events of which the inner can claim to be shadows, it is dubious whether any sense can be given here to the idea of "activity." The attempted categorical sense of M's inner progress has to fall back on the hypothetical sense mentioned above. And the hypothetical proposition cannot be known to be true, even by M, and could be true without anything happening in M's mind at all. So the idea of M as *inwardly* active turns out to be an empty one. There is only outward activity, ergo only outward moral activity, and what we call inward activity is merely the shadow of this cast back into the mind. And, it may be bracingly added, why worry? As Kant said, what we are commanded to do is to love our neighbor in a practical and not a pathological sense.

This is one of those exasperating moments in philosophy when one seems to be being relentlessly prevented from saying something which one is irresistibly impelled to say. And of course, as

Wittgenstein pointed out, the fact that one is irresistibly impelled to say it need not mean that anything *else* is the case. Let us tread carefully here. In reacting against the above analysis there is certainly one thing which I do *not* wish to maintain, and that is that we have infallible or superior knowledge of our mental states. We can be mistaken about what we think and feel: that is not in dispute, and indeed it is a strength of the behaviorist analysis that it so neatly accommodates this fact. What is at stake is something different, something about *activity* in a sense which does not mean privileged activity.

Let me try in a rough ordinary way and as yet without justification to say what I take to be, in spite of the analysis, the case about M: a view which is not congruent with the analysis and which if true shows that the analysis cannot be correct. The analysis pictures M as defined “from the outside in”: M’s individuality lies in her will, understood as her “movements.” The analysis makes no sense of M as continually active, as making progress, or of her inner acts as belonging to her or forming part of a continuous fabric of being: it is precisely critical of metaphors such as “fabric of being.” Yet can we do without such metaphors here? Further, is not the metaphor of vision almost irresistibly suggested to anyone who, without philosophical prejudice, wishes to describe the situation? Is it not the natural metaphor? M *looks* at D, she attends to D, she focuses her attention. M is engaged in an internal struggle. She may for instance be tempted to enjoy caricatures of D in her imagination. (There is curiously little place in the other picture for the idea of *struggle*.) And M’s activity here, so far from being something very odd and hazy, is something which, in a way, we find exceedingly familiar. Innumerable novels contain accounts of what such struggles are like. Anybody could describe one without being at a loss for words. This activity, as I said, could be described in a variety of ways, but one very natural way is by the use of specialized normative words, what one might call the secondary moral words in contrast to the primary and general ones such as “good.” M stops seeing D as “bumptious” and sees her as “gay” etc. I shall comment later upon the importance of these secondary words. Further again, one feels impelled to say something like: M’s activity is peculiarly *her own*. Its details are the details of *this* personality; and partly for this reason it may well be an activity which can only be performed privately. M could not *do this* thing in conversation with another person. Hampshire says that “anything which is to count as a definite reality must be open to several observers.” But can this quasi-scientific notion of individuation through unspecified observers really be applied to a case like this? Here there is an activity but no observers: and if one were to introduce the idea of potential observers the question of their *competence* would still arise. M’s activity is hard to characterize not because it is hazy but *precisely because it is moral*. And with this, as I shall shortly try to explain, we are coming near to the center of the difficulty.

What M is *ex hypothesi* attempting to do is not just to see D accurately but to see her justly or lovingly. Notice the rather different image of freedom which this at once suggests. Freedom is not the sudden jumping of the isolated will in and out of an impersonal logical complex, it is a function of the progressive attempt to see a particular object clearly. M’s activity is essentially something progressive, something infinitely perfectible. So far from claiming for it a sort of infallibility, this new picture has built in the notion of a necessary fallibility. M is engaged in an endless task. As soon as we begin to use words such as “love” and “justice” in characterizing M, we introduce into our

whole conceptual picture of her situation the idea of progress, that is the idea of perfection: and it is just the presence of this idea which demands an analysis of mental concepts which is different from the genetic one...