Moral Sensitivity – the central question of moral education

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Introduction

There can be few people reading this who do not want for their own children that which David Bakhurst wants for his own.

I want them to be concerned about the well-being of other people, to respond to the sufferings of others and to take pleasure in their joy. I want them to respect others, and not to harm or exploit them. I want them to be just and to resent injustices. I want them to value equality, impartiality and democracy. I want them to value special attachments to family and friends, but to extend their sphere of concern more widely. I want them to be alive to the good things in life, to take pleasure in the pleasurable and to shun evil. I want them to be autonomous and to value autonomy. I want them to be prudent. I want them to be reasonable and to value reasonableness …. I want [them] to develop virtues of kindness, generosity, courage, sensitivity, honesty, compassion, and loyalty, among others. ... I want them to be kind … to be resolute, but not dogmatic; to be bold but not impetuous; to listen but not be gullible; to collaborate but to know when to assert themselves; to be tolerant, but uncompromising about serious wrong doing; to be conscientious, but not obsessive, and so on’ (2005: 270-271).

And so on indeed; not only could the list be extended, the dispositions and qualities of character are infinitely perfectible.

My aim here, is not to determine how Bakhurst’s aspirations might be achieved, but to cast light on the necessary pre-requisites of such an enterprise; the underlying motivation being prompted by a long-held discontent with that restrictive view of the moral life according to which there is no more to the moral educator’s concern, than with getting children to do what is right and avoid doing what is wrong; where the focus is on moral agency and autonomous decision-making by reference to rules and principles. Having been tutored by Richard Peters on moral education - himself very much within the Kantian/Kohlbergian tradition, I embarked upon a course on ethics, where the moral philosophy of Richard Hare was the dominant influence, only to experience yet again the deadening effect of the supposed unassailability of moral principles. Returning from yet another lecture on Hare, I fortuitously picked up a second-hand copy of Iris Murdoch’s The Sovereignty of Good, the reading of which, together with the subsequent discovery of John Kekes’s paper on ‘Moral Sensitivity’ in Philosophy, transformed my view of the nature of the discipline and its implications for moral education.

My thinking on such matters has remained on the back burner ever since, but it was the publication of Michael Hand’s recent contribution to the debate, in which he claims that the aim of moral education is to get children to subscribe to moral standards for which they believe to have some justification (2018: 5), that provided the impetus not only to draw attention to some of the questionable assumptions relating to the moral life upon which this appears to rest, but to try and identify the presuppositions upon which any account of moral education worthy of the name, must rely.¹ Not the least problematic feature of appeal to standards in the context of moral education is

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¹ ‘Standards’, according to Hand, are distinguished by: (i) their universality, in being applicable not only to oneself but everyone else in a similar situation, and (ii) by inclining anyone subscribing to them to endorse penalties for non-compliance (2018: 21). Whether the do’s and don’ts - about which, Hand believes, there is a general consensus and
why conformity to such is supposed to confer merit upon one’s actions; there being all kinds of reasons for adhering to a particular standard. One may do so out of fear of consequences, such as those of opprobrium or chastisement, or from an over-blown sense of duty or as a means of self-advancement. Moreover, the ability to appreciate the circumstances when obedience to such standards (or rules) is applicable, is itself a moral achievement and something which, if it is to be done successfully, requires the additional capacity of being able to discern the morally salient features in accordance with which the need for action arises. Capacities such as these, all require a distinct moral sensitivity about which the advocates of rule-adherence have little or nothing to say; not to mention the fact that it is difficult to see how action resulting from conformity to an external standard is supposed to reveal anything about the quality of a particular action, or of the underlying character of its initiator.

Moral sensitivity is a deeply complex concept; unlike the concept of kilometre, it is a graduated concept (such as that of personal autonomy). While requiring a measure of conceptual sophistication, by reference to which a morally sensitive person is able to ‘see’ the morally relevant features of the situation with which she is confronted, it would be wrong to conceive of such situational perception as a unified capacity; which is why Lawrence Blum is correct in saying that ‘it is misleading to speak of someone as … good at perceiving the moral character of particulars tout court’ (1991: 715-716); a parent with strong racist convictions may be sensitive to the needs of her own children while maintaining a callous indifference to those of other people, or to the sufferings of those of a different gender, class or age-group. Having acknowledged moral salience, the morally sensitive person does her best to respond appropriately, which may well require the need for deliberation in accordance with her perceptions. This is not to suggest, however, that deliberation is a necessary condition of responsiveness; far from it. For the most part, we are able to respond in the way we do - apologising for minor misdemeanours, queuing at the checkout - without having to deliberate how to feel or act. Deliberation fulfils an especially useful role in helping us focus on that which is morally salient on those occasions when such a focus is blurred, or where there is moral confusion or conflict. Additional requirements of moral sensitivity include a degree of self-understanding and the ability to empathise and imaginatively engage with the lives of other people.3 If deliberation is the cognitive component of moral sensitivity, that of care and concern is its affective component. An all too brief attempt to signify the epistemic status of emotion’s relation to moral salience, self-understanding and good judgment is made in the third and final section of what follows.

The aim of this paper is, thus, two-fold; it attempts to expose the shortcomings of a particular view of the moral life - wedded as it is to the purported significance of moral behaviour and the necessity of principle - as well as to highlight the significance of the ability to discern moral salience as and when appropriate, the role of attention, accurate perception, and emotion in this endeavour. Legitimate concern with promoting the good and avoiding the bad notwithstanding, it is something that is far too down the line, as it were, in its underestimation of the extent to which considerations such as accurate conceptualisation and clarity of vision have a significant bearing on such matters.

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1 Without which society would be threatened with some form of collapse – should be taught to children, it does, as John White argues (2016), raise questions about their scope and justification.

2 The visual metaphor of ‘seeing’ is no more than that, insofar as it is not meant to exclude sense modalities other than that of sight in the determination of moral relevance.

3 While avoiding an unnecessary digression into the nature of empathy and its role in the moral life, it is worth drawing attention to Derek Matravers’s broad characterisation of the term as: ‘using our imaginations as a tool so as to adopt a different perspective in order to grasp how things appear (or feel) from there’ (2017: 1-2), as well as to the research conducted by Daniel Batson, according to whom there is a great deal of empirical support for what he calls ‘the empathy-altruism hypothesis’ – that ‘empathic concern produces [a powerful] altruistic motivation’ (2014: 44-45).
1. The Moral Life

1.1 Agency and Choice

There is a familiar view of morality, according to which its sole concern is with the conduct or behaviour of moral agents in the public realm. Such a ‘behaviourist’ view is altogether too limited, in restricting moral personhood to that which is wholly episodic, as opposed to something more continuous and bound up with one’s self-identity. A moral being is more than the sum total of her actions; she possesses a certain sensitivity which ‘cannot be understood simply as a disposition to perform certain actions [but as something altogether] more pervasive, informing her emotional reactions to things, what she notices, what is salient for her, and the like, and particular actions and emotions can be seen as stemming from this sensitivity.’ (Blum, ibid: 713. Cf. Iris Murdoch, 1971: 22, where she says that ‘[t]he moral life … is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrences of explicit moral choices.’).4 The point of moral deliberation is not merely to determine a particular course of action, but in order to see the situation with which one is confronted in a better light, with the aim of becoming a good (or at least a better) person; part of which includes having certain ‘reactive attitudes’ such as guilt, remorse and shame (Strawson, 1974), upon which an ungrudging willingness to at least try and make amends for one’s moral transgressions, depends.

The significance of Murdoch’s moral philosophy lies in the extent to which it rehabilitates the inner life to its rightful place. ‘It is’, she says, ‘what lies behind and between actions and prompts them that is important’.5 She is right to cast doubt on both Humean and Kantian dualisms, to the effect that moral action requires belief plus desire in the case of the former, and rational will in opposition to emotion and affect, in that of the latter: ‘Man is not a combination of rational thinker and a personal will. He is a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees’ (ibid: 40).6 She is also right to question the role of choice in morality; the supposed significance of which having held sway for far too long.7 Choice itself, she reminds us, operates against a background world in which some things matter more than others – ‘I can only choose within the world I can see, in the moral sense of “see” which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort’ and adds, parenthetically, ‘There is also of course “distorted vision” (ibid: 37). Clarity of vision has itself certain pre-requisites, such as a measure of conceptual sophistication in order to identify a particular situation for what it is; as cruel, unworthy, selfish, unfair, and the like, without which one would have no moral compass whatsoever. The degree of sophistication in question will inevitably vary with age; a child may well be able to see something as unfair without necessarily being able to conceptualise it under the banner of injustice.

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4 Carla Bagnoli points out that Murdoch’s truly radical claim is that ‘one can be morally active while entertaining a contemplative attitude, while doing nothing’ (2012: 206).
5 She goes on to add that ‘[b]y the time the moment of choice has arrived the quality of attention has probably determined the nature of the act’ (op cit: 67, emphasis added); a not entirely implausible supposition.
6 As Justin Broakes says in his magisterial Introduction to Iris Murdoch, Philosopher, ‘Murdoch’s own conception might be described as affirming in human beings the inextricability of perception and reason and will and desire, which together … act in essential connection, upon a background of habit and inheritance (which itself has evolved through constant interplay of forces internal and external to the person)’ (2012: 9).
7 Something for which Hare (1952), in insisting that moral principles gain their force by reference to self-chosen ways of life, bears a large responsibility. Not the least difficulty with subjectivism in this context is that standards of correct judgment in such matters originate within the individual. But as Wittgenstein succinctly notes, ‘[if] whatever is going to seem right to me is right … that only means that we can’t talk here about “right”’ (1953: 258). Judgment, in other words, presupposes certain public standards, which is why it won’t do to reduce practical reasoning to a species of choice-making, as we find in so much moral philosophy influenced by Hare.
In order to appreciate the real texture of moral life, Kekes argues, ‘one must start with how a person sees the situation in which he is to act. *Sensitive perception is the crux of the matter*’ (1984: 7, emphasis added); which is why emphasis on choice is so misleading, and why intelligible choices between courses of action are not made on the basis of some Kantian-like lonely will, but presuppose familiarity with what Charles Taylor (1977) calls the language of ‘contrastive evaluation’ - such as courageous/cowardly, considerate/selfish, generous/greedy, praiseworthy/shameful, noble/base, modest/arrogant, kind/cruel, fair/unfair and so on; without which moral deliberation would be impossible - there being no criteria by reference to which one thing would count as better (or matter more) than another. 8 When such descriptive appraisals are correctly employed, choice of action will be less problematic as a result. At least part of what is involved in moral growth, is the ability to become more adept in the accurate deployment of such concepts. Moral sensitivity is required not only to correctly characterise a particular set of circumstances for what they are, but also in order to be able to conceive or imagine something as a *possible* object of choice in the first place.

A composer is able to write down any note she chooses; but for these to add up to anything remotely meaningful, she is restricted by the traditions of which she is a part, such as that of composing a string quartet. If she is fortunate, there will be a certain inevitability in her notation; and this is where ‘sensitive perception’ enters the picture. In the moral sphere, our ability to characterise a particular situation by reference to some kind of descriptive appraisal, is possible only because we are the inheritors of a *moral* tradition or prevailing practice; succinctly defined by Kekes as ‘the network of a certain sort of customary conduct that exists in society’, and by reference to which moral education may be said to be ‘an initiation into the vision of possibilities in human life; [or] a training in the development of a sensibility in terms of which one perceives good and evil’, thereby equipping people with a ‘framework for interpretation and evaluation’ (1985: 255-257). 9 Having been initiated into such a tradition, we are, Murdoch rightly insists, unable to ‘suddenly alter what we see and ergo what we desire’; thus providing plausibility to her claim that ‘if I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be arrived at’ (*op cit*: 39-40). Possible reservations about such a claim notwithstanding, there comes a point where choice gives way to *discovery*; prompting one to realise that what one had hitherto taken to be a correct understanding of a state of affairs was erroneous or superficial.

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8 Descriptive appraisals such as these, serve to reinforce the distinction made by Bernard Williams (1985) between ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ moral concepts. Unlike thin moral concepts, such as good or bad, thick moral concepts possess a greater degree of descriptive specificity, thereby serving to break down the so-called distinction between fact and value.

9 This is not to underestimate the role of personal responsibility in the moral life, neither is it to say that the values underpinning our decisions are determined; it is say that those situations where deliberation between competing alternatives is called for, cannot be reduced to mere choice in the way that philosophers such as Hare would have us believe. Reference to the significance of a moral tradition may well be thought to expose one to the charge of relativism, as if moral traditions were themselves insulated from objective evaluation. The question of how it is possible to subject the respective merits of different moral traditions to critical appraisal need not detain us, but Kekes provides a persuasive account of how this might be achieved. In a somewhat different vein, Joseph Raz (2001) attempts to dispel the illusion that the objectivity of value judgments should be cast in doubt as a result of their necessary reliance on a ‘shared’ view of the world. The fact that people from different cultures with a different moral outlook employ concepts radically different from ours, in order to identify the moral features of the world they inhabit, is not something about which we should be overly concerned. The coherence of *incommensurable* conceptual schemes notwithstanding – for an important and influential treatment of which, see Donald Davidson (1984) – Raz is correct to caution against exaggerating the conceptual insularity of different cultures. Evaluative judgements may well be incompatible (if they are inconsistent or mutually exclusive in the life of a particular person), but incompatibility of this kind, far from undermining the possibility of moral objectivity, simply serves to remind us of the *plurality* of values. This is, in part, why reasons for action are not universalizable, which means that what is right for me may well not be right for you; the truth-of-which is borne out by Peter Winch’s claim to the effect that: ‘if A says “X is the right thing for me to do” and if B, in a situation not relevantly different, says “X is the wrong thing for me to do” it can be that both are correct. That is, it may be that neither what each says, nor anything entailed by what each says, contradicts anything said or implied by the other’ (1972: 164-165).
1.2 Rules and Principles

Moral principles have long been thought to serve a number of functions in moral decision-making. As a ‘check list’ of morally relevant properties, they may be thought to provide the moral agent with the wherewithal for being able to determine the rightness or wrongness of any particular action, without which any such determination may be deemed impossible, arbitrary or capricious. According to Onora O’Neill, one of their most staunch advocates, not only do they serve to justify moral particularists – or moral illiteracy. According to Jonathan Dancy, is that there ‘is no substitute for the sort of detailed attention to each new case which an appeal to principles might lead us to shirk’ (1985: 152).

The danger of relying on rules, is that it may well result in what is in effect a lack of sensitivity to the requirements of a specific set of moral circumstances – the significance of which, O’Neill is resolutely dismissive. It can lead to what Andrew Gleeson refers to as ‘rule-fetishism’; the result of which is that rule adherence is bought at the unacceptable price of moral understanding. Not only would this be a form of bad faith, he argues, but a form of moral illiteracy. ‘No rule or principle for behaviour can excuse one from responsibility’ he says, ‘for I am always responsible for whether the rule applies in any case’; genuine moral understanding being ‘manifested in a disposition to moral reactions’ (2007: 366, original emphasis). Again, as Martha Nussbaum notes, understanding what is required of one may vary from situation to situation - there being occasions when the circumstances surrounding a situation are unfamiliar and strangely puzzling, for which no rule or principle is capable of serving as an adequate or reliable guide (1990: 71-73); which means that any proposed list of rules or principles would have to be so large as to render them useless for all practical purposes. Any utility they might enjoy should be restricted to what Matthew Kiernan refers to as a ‘backstop’, once the limits of our understanding of ourselves and the moral reality with which we are confronted, have been reached. (1996: 350, n. 19), or to what Dancy calls ‘reminders’ of what we already know about the moral relevance of the feature(s) associated with any particular moral situation (1985: 150). Whatever limited role they might have in this respect, however, they are rarely, if ever, without exception and should not be applied without reference to context.

To suppose that principles can serve as a form of action-guidance is, therefore, to put the cart before the horse; since without reference to one’s take on the situation, it is difficult to understand how the moral requirements stemming from a specific set of circumstances may be seen to fall under a particular principle. Unless and until I am able to judge a situation as one requiring the avoidance of cruelty, or the need to provide assistance, I have no means of deciding whether or not principles such as ‘One should never be cruel’ or ‘Always try and help others in distress’ are applicable or not. It is not the principle that determines what I should do, but the judgment that I ought (here and now) to do something in particular. Anyone relying on principles as a means of action-guidance is in danger of moral slovenliness in failing to address contextual requirements, as well as of being in grave danger of failing to identify the moral salience of features undetermined by any moral principles upon which

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10 The defining feature of particularism, according to Jonathan Dancy, is that there ‘is no substitute for the sort of detailed attention to each new case which an appeal to principles might lead us to shirk’ (1985: 152).
they have been taught to rely, with all the harmful consequences that any such reliance might entail. Reflection about what to do requires more than the application of principle; it necessitates the weighing up of those all too frequent moral demands of things like helpfulness, cruelty-avoidance and such like, not to mention the complexities associated with the non-moral features of a situation that contribute to rendering it as cruel or kind; there being countless ways in which one might be deemed cruel or kind. Herein lies the significance of sharing a moral tradition or outlook; for it is only from the ‘inside’ that one is able to appreciate the contextual significance of any particular configuration of natural features, as John McDowell clearly demonstrates. In so doing, he is not denying the existence of moral rules, but rather trying to indicate how much more there is to virtue than a rigid adherence to such. Invoking Aristotle, he says that ‘the best generalisations about how one should behave hold only for the most part. If one attempted to reduce one’s conception of what virtue requires to a set of rules, then however subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing up the code, cases would inevitably turn up in which mechanical application of the rules would strike one as wrong’ (1979: 336). The fact that there is no single non-moral feature in respect of which a situation may be judged cruel or kind, explains why moral knowledge requires judgment or phronësis (practical wisdom), and why moral particularists are loathe to admit to the necessity of appealing to principles when attempting to justify a moral judgment, on the grounds that moral reasons function holistically.

The irrelevance of rules or principles as guides to what should be done, may be seen from the following homely example. While wondering how to spend an idle afternoon, an adolescent’s decision to visit her grandmother in hospital would not be reduced to arbitrary caprice were she to do so for reasons other than those in accordance with the principle that ‘All Grannies who are lonely and would welcome a visit from their loved ones should, especially when such loved ones have no other pressing commitments, be visited’. It is the mutual affection that binds them, that suffices to both explain and to justify her decision to pay her grandmother a visit; her action being determined by reference to her sensitivity to the salient features of the situation as opposed to the mechanistic application of a universally applicable principle.

Again, the so-called heuristic value of rules and principles in the early stages of moral upbringing is exaggerated. In an attempt to delineate the concept of ‘moral maturity’, Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1991) propose a phenomenological description of five stages towards such a goal; the moral ‘novice’, they suggest, is like the novice in chess or driving, insofar as she relies on a set of rules or procedures. Upon reaching the stage of moral maturity however, she possesses a certain expertise, by reference to which she sees what needs to be done and decides how to do it without reference to rules. However important rules of procedure in the early stages of driving a car or playing chess happen to be, short of further argument or evidence, the necessity or desirability of rule-adherence in the context of moral upbringing is less obvious than such proponents would have us believe. Perhaps there is a case, as Beth Dixon suggests, for ‘introducing contextual circumstances into ethical thinking, saying, and doing, in all its complexity from the outset’ (2015: 77); for as Matthew Lipman et al point out: ‘The sensitive discrimination of similarities and dissimilarities among situations is of fundamental importance to the child’s moral development. … [who] must be able to take into account a large

11 The argument is Wittgensteinian in origin. See, for example, what Wittgenstein has to say about following a rule, and how the application of a rule presupposes agreement in judgment amongst language users within a form of life. What counts as ‘doing the same thing’ it is not fixed by rules or principles. If it is rational consistency we are looking for, then we must do more than search for a codifiable set of principles; instead, we need to look and see how to go on, which itself presupposes a specific sensitivity to context. (1953: 138-155).

12 See, for example, Margaret Little (2000: 284-285). According to Sarah Broadie and Christopher Rowe, as far as Aristotle is concerned, the truly practical agent ‘looks upon his situation not simply as a PQR situation, even where that description is true and relevant, but as this P, this Q, this, R’ (2000: 49).
number of subtle and complex features of situations … that are present when we compare or contrast such situations with one another’ (1980: 166).

2. Moral Salience, Moral Attentiveness and Moral Perception

2.1 Salience

Bakhurst is right to point out that ‘what is salient in any moral situation is not just determined by the world’ (2000: 173); there being more to its discernment than mere observation. In identifying the salient for what it is, the morally sensitive person is acknowledging something about herself, in terms of the sort of person she takes herself to be or aspires to become; thereby engaging with something more than simply trying to decide what to do. Morally salient features, once identified, while crucial in the determination of an appropriate response, may nonetheless fail to provide one with sufficient reason for doing one thing rather than another; for a host of possible reasons. Not only may one fail to appreciate what such a recognition demands of one, one may well find oneself overwhelmed by the complexity of the situation, or the contradictory demands associated with any number of plausible courses of action. The mere act of recognising something as an act of bullying or sexism, for example, may result in one not having a clue about what to do in that particular context. Although perplexity in such circumstances is not a moral failing, the fact remains that unless one is able to determine the morally salient features for what they are, one would lack the requisite motivation to do anything at all. ‘Deciding what to do involves more than just opening oneself to the facts, one has to make sense of the facts from the moral point of view’ (ibid: 174); all of which requires effort. As Bridget Clarke observes, it is a feature of a thick moral concept that ‘one may need to occupy an evaluative point of view, to take a felt interest in [its subject matter], in order to grasp its existence’ (forthcoming, original emphasis).

The need for effort, in determining the most appropriate characterisation of a particular situation, is particularly acute when one is confronted with a situation having multiple descriptions requiring any number of ethical claims on our part. Is the beggar at the tube station a lazy good for nothing meriting contempt, or a victim of circumstance meriting pity? And is the recalcitrant and fractious student in my class someone who is in need of help and support, or simply wilfully perverse in the apparent pleasure she gains from being disruptive? Again, without conceptual clarity one would be unable to see the immersion of a live mouse into a pan of boiling water, as an act of wanton cruelty or the fact that what is being done, is wrong. As Little says: the way in which a situation is conceptualised is itself sufficient to provide the explanations, to make it intelligible to us why the person had the merited response’ (1995: 126), such as that of anger, disgust, or revulsion. If I see you mocking someone who is afflicted in some way, and respond by saying ‘That’s cruel’, I am drawing your attention to the fact that it is cruel and wrong and for that reason you should desist; a reason, moreover, that neither requires the existence of, or commitment to, a moral principle.

However, as indispensable as accuracy in relation to the conceptualisation of any specific situation undeniably is, more needs to be said about how one is supposed to determine the precise import of the moral situation with which one is confronted; what are the criteria of relevance, or accuracy? It is easier to say what is not necessary than what is required. In providing a satisfactory answer to such questions, reference to moral principles can be safely ignored, in spite of anything Hare or Barbara Herman might say to the contrary.13 As Peggy DesAutels says: ‘no principles of moral salience can

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13 While Hare (1981: 89) believes that it is only by reference to moral principles that moral salience can be determined, Herman, armed with impeccable Kantian credentials, invokes the necessity for what she calls ‘rules of moral salience’. ‘Acquired as elements in a moral education’ she says, ‘they structure an agent’s perception of his situation so that what he perceives is a world with moral features. They enable him to pick out those elements of his circumstances or of his proposed action that require moral attention’ (1993: 77).
tell us how best to formulate our maxims. [Herman’s] proposal that [the problem of identifying moral perceptual norms] is solved simply by teaching children justified rules of moral salience is socially and psychologically unrealistic…. The moral processes involved in framing one’s situation and in determining its saliences involves much more than the application of pre-formulated consciously accessible rules. We cannot simply articulate (and then follow) rules or algorithms that tell us how best to describe particular states of affairs’ (2012: 339), let alone, she might well have added, what should count as an appropriate moral response. None of this, of course, is to deny that subscription to principles of various kinds may contribute towards the identification of moral salience. Someone uncommitted to the principle of justice, or respect for persons, would probably be less likely than someone not so committed to notice examples of sexism or racism when they are staring her in the face.

2.2 Attention

The relationship between one’s attentiveness towards, and perception of, any particular moral situation is highly interdependent. An attentive person is more likely to perceive the moral reality with which she is confronted. The fact that a fellow passenger is experiencing discomfort while having to stand, may go blissfully unnoticed by X, while having an immediately recognisable salience for Y. Failure to see the need to vacate her seat may not be down to callousness X’s part, but due to tiredness, laziness or moral myopia - there being numerous contributory factors that prevent or hinder clarity of vision. Similarly, a parent, attuned to her baby’s cries in the night, notices the child’s discomfort in a way that may go unnoticed by the lodgers - lacking in what Margaret Holland calls a ‘background disposition for relevant details to come to … consciousness – for them to emerge as salient’ (1998: 122, emphasis added). The morally attentive person is, as it were, dispositionally attuned to the needs and predicaments of other people. As a result of caring about what we see, we are able to discern matters of special import. Without experiencing some kind of emotional response to the ‘object’ of our attention, however significant such objects might appear, they would not be experienced as such. In this sense, emotions are an aid to our attentiveness.

Few writers have done more to emphasise the significance of attention in the moral life than Iris Murdoch. We have already seen how her discontent with reducing such a life to one of mere agency led her to restoring the inner life to its rightful place, with the aim of gaining ‘control over the direction and focus of vision’ (op cit: 42), if behaviour, or any other moral response, is to be improved. Her famous example of the inattentive mother-in-law, is designed to draw attention to the ways in which the prism of our own concerns can result in ‘distorted vision’. A mother (M) feels hostility towards her otherwise good-natured daughter-in-law (D) in finding her ‘lacking in dignity and refinement, pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile.’ She feels that her son has married beneath him. (ibid: 17). As a result of an inner struggle, and by carefully attending to the object of her concerns - even in circumstances where the object in question (in this case, D) might be dead - M is forced to look again and to reconsider her adverse assessment of D, thereby discovering her to be ‘not vulgar, but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful’ (ibid: 17-18).

In so doing, her perception of D is not only more accurate - reflecting D as she actually is (or was) - but has a moral value irrespective of any implications it may have for subsequent behaviour. In

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14 Her alternative proposal for the development of moral perceptual norms, is spelled out in terms of what she refers to as ‘morally responsive perceivers’, who, she suggests, approach situations mindfully and attentively, do not misperceive the well-being or suffering of others, attempt to see such situations from multiple perspectives, attempt to perceive … saliences which best help them achieve their moral aims and goals, and try to educate themselves on their implicit biases towards others (2012: 344-345).
admitting to herself that her earlier characterisation of D was erroneous, stemming as it did from jealousy or prejudice, M has grown (morally speaking).\textsuperscript{15} 

An initial, and perhaps casual reading of this example may lead one to believe that careful attention, while necessary for accurate perception, is \textit{sufficient}. Murdoch, however, explicitly denies this. ‘What M is \textit{ex hypothesi} attempting to do is not just to see D accurately but to see her \textit{justly} or \textit{lovingly}’ (ibid: 23, emphasis added). The significance of this has for too long remained unnoticed, in that the whole force of Murdoch’s reference to looking justly and lovingly, is to emphasise the importance of \textit{fairness} in one’s assessment and, most importantly, the concern, care and respect that should be accorded to other people. The loving parent who tries to see her son as he is in himself, is engaged in something far more precious than information-gathering about what makes him tick; that would be to accord undue prominence to her own concerns. Someone else might well desire to see her child for who he really is - as vulnerable, suggestive, or whatever - with the intention of exploiting such features to her own advantage. In fact, that might well be the motivating factor underpinning her concern, given the pleasure she derives from humiliating vulnerable people. There is nothing in accurate perception \textit{per se} which suffices to guarantee a morally appropriate response. The importance of Murdochian attention for our purposes, is that it is motivated by a genuine desire to see the world from others’ perspectives.\textsuperscript{16}

In spite of the significance Murdoch rightfully attaches to the notion of attention, it can take us only so far. In trying to resolve the apparently irresolvable conflict between one’s commitment to the value of both justice and compassion, for example, one may well have to resort to something deep within, by asking questions relating to long-term peace of mind and integrity of being; all without the need for rules or principles. Deliberation, though not a \textit{requirement} of moral agency, is sometimes unavoidable - such that refusal or failure to recognise its necessity is itself a moral failing - which is why the moral life is more demanding than simple reliance on ‘proper attention’, and why Murdoch is too sanguine in her assertion that: ‘If I attend properly I will have no choices’ - even though it might be ‘the ultimate condition to be arrived at’ (ibid: 40).\textsuperscript{17} For this reason, I am sympathetic to Blum’s surmise that she is here conflating more than one aspect of a moral situation: ‘the recognition of a need for decisive action, and discerning the specific decisive action that would produce the required outcome or otherwise be the right thing to do’ (2012: 321). The resolution of such matters is beyond the scope of this paper, but it could plausibly be argued that the kind of deep deliberation so often required is itself a form of attention.

2.3. Perception

Having concluded that attentiveness will not suffice in the discernment of moral salience, it is necessary to consider the role of moral perception in this regard; since reliable moral agency presupposes that the moral agent has not only carefully attended to a specific set of circumstances,
but sees them for what they are.\(^{18}\) This is not to suggest that the ‘objects’ of perception may be understood as mere rightness and wrongness; that would be to equate moral perception with judgment, when perception - logically, if not always temporarily - precedes judgment, and without which, judgment would count for very little.

As someone armed with a vocabulary of thick moral concepts, not only do I have no need to engage in moral judgment of any kind in order to see that immersing a live mouse into a pan of boiling water is cruel and wrong - even though perceiving the agony to which the rodent was subject, is altogether different from seeing the horror of it as justifying the reaction of revulsion felt by the morally sensitive perceiver - but my perception of such, is insufficient in itself to warrant any specific course of action; identification of moral relevance does not entail that one knows what to do about it. Nevertheless, having identified the action as one of torture, it is reasonable to conclude with McDowell - for whom perception is a developed ‘sensitivity to reason’ (1998: 133) - that I have a good reason to act; to deny as much would be to admit that one had failed to perceive the moral salience that the infliction of such cruelty on a live rodent obviously possesses. And yet he is wrong to define moral perception in relation to morally appropriate action; my sensitivity to the fact that someone has made a racist comment cannot be reduced to an understanding about what I should do when, as I have tried to demonstrate, it is much broader than that. Although it is undeniably the case that accurate and sensitive moral perception has an action-guiding quality about it, whereby the acts in question are in direct response to such perception, and not something the explanation or justification of which (for the most part) requires deliberation or judgment, it is an exaggeration to conclude, as does McDowell, that ‘[moral] salience cannot be understood except in terms of reason for action which silences all others’ (1979: 345, emphasis added). As it stands, this is an insufficiently nuanced understanding of moral reasoning, as well as to ignore the fact that there is more to the moral life than concern with moral behaviour. If perception is not sufficient to motivate one to act as one should, it is equally incapable of providing some kind of panacea towards solving the problem of overcoming conflicts associated with competing considerations. Again, in perceiving that the person next to me is on the verge of collapse, and that I need to help irrespective of the urgency attaching to other appointments, my realisation that I need to do something is as non-inferential as perceiving that the cat is on the mat.\(^{19}\) In this respect at least, McDowell is correct in saying that: ‘A kind person has a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement that situations impose on behaviour … [which is] a sort of perceptual capacity’ (1978: 85); his scepticism relating to the idea that such perception is not the kind that should be taken literally, notwithstanding.

If Murdoch has little to say about the criteria by reference to which accurate moral perception gains a purchase, it is clear - to the extent that what she says in relation to attention is equally applicable to that of perception - that accuracy in this context refers to seeing the world as it actually is; where

\(^{18}\) There is some dispute between those who take reference to moral perception to be no more than metaphorical, and others, myself included, who have no problem with conceiving of it in purely literal terms. After all, there is nothing problematic about seeing that the person in front of you is your father, that the traffic lights amount to three in number, that the object upon which you are about to sit is a stool, or that the following letters, ‘SCISSORS’, written consecutively, refer to something with which you can cut; so why question the idea of literal perception when it comes to seeing an action as cruel? As David McNaughton says: ‘If we are prepared to allow that I can see a cliff as dangerous, that Smith is worried or that one thing is further away than another, then there seems no reason to be squeamish about letting in moral observation’ (1988: 57).

\(^{19}\) Peter Goldie agrees; with the qualification that references to non-inferential perception in such contexts should be understood in the phenomenological sense, as opposed to the epistemic or justificatory sense (2007), even if we may not always succeed in getting it right. Seeing what is the kind thing to do, while not equivalent to seeing what is the right thing to do, may however, on those occasions when there are no competing moral demands, be one and the same thing. Having said as much, however, appearances can be deceptive; which is why moral judgment in situations involving deep moral complexity, such as the competing demands associated with compassion and justice, may well be inferential.
failure in this regard is failure to see it as it should be seen, and that the difference between accurate and inaccurate perception is not something that can be reduced to a matter of what one believes; the change required is a matter of ‘vision’. Inaccurate perceptions, or failure to perceive, are due as much to carelessness, complacency or moral blindness, as they are to more serious defects of character such as egotism, bias or bigotry, lack of self-understanding, or narcissism; all of which contribute to that distorted vision to which she draws attention in both her philosophy and her novels.20

In a particularly insightful account of Murdoch’s account of moral perception, Clarke shows how there is no room for complacency. ‘Given the relentless machinations of the ego, the Murdochian agent must be ever vigilant, ever questioning the credibility of her perceptions and endeavouring to perfect them’ (2012: 240). In Murdoch’s example of M and D, the mother says: ‘I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again’ (op cit: 17, emphasis added); requiring as it does, a struggle to see the situation as it really is. As part of the process of correctly identifying her moral failings, M experiences a Gestalt shift in the way the situation is conceived. According to Nomy Arpaly, Huckleberry Finn experienced a ‘perceptual shift’, resulting in him being able to see his friend Jim as a person, just like himself, as opposed to a piece of property. The significance of examples such as these, is not in the resulting changes in M’s and Huck’s beliefs and subsequent behaviour - for belief and behaviour are themselves a product of perception - but in the way they see the world. In the case of Huck, his decision not to surrender Jim to the slave hunters was contrary to both the racist principles to which he subscribes, and to his belief that in so doing, he is doing the wrong thing. (2003: 75-78).21 In the context of the present discussion, Clarke’s conclusion is one meriting full endorsement. It is not, she says, ‘that reason provides no guidance to the moral agent; it is simply that it does not disclose itself to us in the form of a principle capable of marking the necessary discriminations … and moral agency is something that is perfectly comprehensible without reference to such’ (ibid: 253).

Wherein lies deficiency in moral vision is not something that can be pursued here; but it is far from certain that racists or homophobes would readily alter their view of the world as a result of mere argumentation. Insofar as they are likely change their minds, they are more likely to do so as a result of living and working with people who, as different from themselves as they may be, are, in all morally relevant respects, no different at all. The fact remains, however, that in attempting to combat those forces conspiring to prevent people from seeing the world as it is, there are a whole range of strategies to which the moral educator may resort; not least of which, in terms of potential value, is that of introducing children to the world of narrative fiction, including that of film and drama. What is important for ethics, Nussbaum reminds us, is the need for a well-honed ‘responsiveness to the concrete - including features that have not been seen before and could not have been housed in any

20 It is of course possible, that failure to notice may be the result of something as serious as emotionally empathetic dysfunctionality, resulting in the lack of what James Blair refers to as ‘an emotional response to another individual that is congruent with the other’s emotional reaction’ (2007: 4), which, according to some, is a clear indication of psychopathy. For an interesting philosophical explanation of how ‘badness’ might be represented in a ‘normal’ person’s experience and not that of one suffering from such dysfunctionality, see Preston Werner (2014). Thus, ‘when two people faced with the same moral requirement differ in response, such that one has the merited response and the other has no response at all, there is some way in which their conceptions of the situation differs (ibid: 18). On the role of lack of moral imagination in failure to determine moral salience or appropriate courses of action, see Mavis Biss (2014).

21 It would be a travesty to suggest that in facing such a dilemma, Huck is confronted with anything remotely as simple as a choice between alternatives, or that his decision was made on the basis of rule-following or principle. The moral conflict with which he is faced is one between two competing moral commitments (loyalty to the principle of property, versus the value of personal friendship); commitments (or attachments) which, however inchoate or unarticulated, are part his moral life. Although she is right in claiming that one can know the right thing to do without knowing that one knows it, I do not agree with Arpaly’s assessment of Huck’s character. She believes that he is a good boy in virtue of having done the right thing. Although his actions were without question morally praiseworthy, it takes more than doing something for the right reasons to make someone a good person.
antecedently built system of rules’ (*op cit*: 37); and it is the novel, she argues, that has the capacity, like nothing else, to highlight that which has moral salience. Narrative art, and fiction in particular, open our eyes to the need for sensitivity to the vastly different kinds of moral phenomena and the equally vast range in which they are manifested. As a result, we are sensitised to the criteria we employ in the making of moral judgments, not only about fictional characters, but also about real people, alive or dead.

3. Emotion and Moral Sensitivity

One of the reasons for the supposed inferior epistemic status of emotion when compared to that of reason, is that emotions are said to distort our view of what is important; one has only to think of the power of emotions such as jealousy or anger in this regard. However great their potential for distortion, it is insufficient to render them entirely unreliable indicators of moral reality; there being no reason why they must of necessity ‘skew the epistemic landscape’ (Goldie, 2004, 2005); such a landscape may well be equally distorted by the adoption of a purely dispassionate stance towards it. As Little says: ‘Distance does not always clarify’ (1995: 118); while Nancy Sherman is persuasive in arguing that without emotions our awareness of moral salience would be peculiarly inferior, insofar as we would ‘not fully register the facts or record them with the sort of resonance and importance that only emotional involvement can sustain’ (1989: 47), [and that] ‘a sense of indignation makes us sensitive to those who suffer unwarranted insult or injury, just as a sense of compassion or pity opens our eyes to the pains of sudden and cruel misfortune’ (*ibid*: 45). To respond dispassionately to an animal being tortured, or a child being bullied, is as inappropriate as is fear of harmless creepy-crawlies or pride in one’s ability to humiliate others. Emotions such as horror, indignation or fear, enable us to identify not only evaluative facts such as horrific, outrageous and dangerous, but also ‘respondent-dependent properties’ such as amusing, depressing or disgusting; as well as providing access to facts more generally. Emotions do not simply ‘foreground’ properties of salience; they are, as Ronald deSousa argues, themselves evaluations (1987: 137), and may serve to furnish one with epistemic access to one’s beliefs and commitments - moral or otherwise. An example borrowed from Adam Pelser serves to reinforce the truth of a such a claim: ‘… while I might believe that slavery is unjust and I might be averse to slavery because of my belief that it is unjust, until I have been angered or felt indignation towards an instance of slavery, I have not “seen” the injustice of it’ (2014: 112). Emotions provide a heightened sense of what matters in ways that purely cognitive states cannot. In this respect they are not the mere outcome of believing something to be important; they have an indispensable role in determining import in the first place.

One response to the distorting power of emotions, is a Stoic determination to suppress them - the results of which go beyond the epistemic, extending as they do to the psychological - the damaging consequences of which are all too familiar. A more intelligent response would be to redouble our efforts to ensure their appropriateness to circumstance. It is a feature of an emotion’s ‘intentionality’

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22 On the contribution of the arts in general to moral understanding, see Marples (2017).
23 According to George Brun and Dominque Kuenzle (2016: 22), ‘To consider something to be relevant or salient with respect to some goal and context of inquiry, is to evaluate it … as something to be considered further…. Emotions fulfilling this function can be evaluated, for we can wrongly find something salient or relevant’. They go on to indicate the ways in which emotions provide access to one’s own propositional attitudes, beliefs and commitments. ‘The fact that somebody’s behaviour disappoints me can be my sole clue that I had certain expectations towards [his] behaviour (*Ibid*).
24 Cf. Catherine Elgin, (1996: 159-161); once again providing reason to believe that just as sense-perception provides grounds for beliefs, so too can emotions; there being no greater problem associated with determining emotions’ reliability in this regard than in learning to trust where and when our sense-perceptions are more or less reliable.
24 Cf. Mark Johnston’s comments to the effect that ‘if one has never been moved or affected by the determinate ways in which things are beautiful or charming [or] horrific … then one is ignorant of the relevant or determinate values’ (2001: 192). The implications for moral testimony are obvious.
in being object-directed - towards the dangerous in the case of fear, for example, (see Anthony Kenny, 1963: 131ff) - that allows us to refer to an emotion’s appropriateness or otherwise. The appropriateness of an emotion is determined not by reference to correct belief alone, however, but requires a certain emotional input. Without the ability to feel, it is not always possible to know whether the appropriate response to personal slight should be that of anger, disgust, contempt, or wry amusement. Appropriateness is not only a feature of the non-evaluative features of a situation; it is also a feature of the extent to which something has personal import, which is why self-understanding has a significant bearing on the extent to which any particular emotional response is appropriate. How the mechanisms operating against such understanding might be overcome, is a separate issue; but self-deception is often the result of things like egotism and vanity - character failings that all too frequently conspire to hinder accurate perception, the damaging consequences of which, Murdoch rightly draws attention.

We have already had cause to believe that one’s moral outlook is in part determined by the quality of one’s attention and accuracy of perception - themselves a function of the way situations are conceived - which is why McDowell says that ‘[in] moral upbringing what one learns is not to behave in conformity with rules of conduct, but to see situations in a special light’ (1978: 85). However difficult such ‘situational appreciation’ (Wiggins, 1976/6) is, it is nonetheless something to which moral agents must aspire, if they are to know what is required of them on any particular occasion. If ‘being a certain kind of person’ is indeed a requirement of knowing what to do ‘occasion by occasion’ (McDowell, 1979: 73), then it is important to consider the extent to which emotions have a useful part to play in such an endeavour. It is precisely because emotional responses have a direct bearing on that to which we attend and perceive, as well as on their corresponding import, that leads Starkey to claim that character traits very much depend on ‘an emotional repertoire that provides the proper sort of perceptions’ (2015: 198). The truth of this goes some way towards lending credibility to Murdoch’s claim that ‘at crucial moments of choice the business of choosing is over’ (op cit: 37) - at least for those whose moral characters are sufficiently developed.

The relationship between the quality of one’s deliberative powers and emotions may not be immediately self-evident, and the respects in which they are necessary and/or sufficient, is disputed. According to Robert Roberts, emotions function (or at least may function) as judgments in precisely the same way as auditory or visual perceptions function as bases for judgments (2013: 38). If our guilt disposition is well-formed, then the emotion will lend some justification to the judgment that what I did was wrong or reprehensible; in spite of the fact that emotions might very well prejudice the reasoner or degrade moral reasoning (ibid: 60-62). Emotions have what Sydney Callahan (1988) refers to as a ‘tutoring role’ in circumstances such as those confronting Huckleberry Finn, where emotional responses are instrumental in rejecting principled objections to a person’s right to equal respect and treatment. ‘Just as empirical anomalies create premises from which a revision of existing theory may emerge by reasoning’, Roberts says, ‘emotions that conflict with our moral opinions may prevent our drawing conclusions with confidence, and keep us investigating’ (op cit: 66).

**Conclusion**

The behaviourist view of the moral life, together with that view of moral education upon which it rests - with its insistence on the overriding importance of agency, obligation and rule-adherence - fails to capture the significance of the inner life of moral personhood. Any principle or moral response by reference to which one acts, presupposes that the circumstances in question have been correctly identified as having a peculiar relevance, and it should not be simply assumed that the ways in which these are characterised is necessarily correct. Accurate perception frequently involves being able to adopt the perspective of someone other than oneself, which in turn requires both the ability to imagine
how they might feel and the need to care about that; failure to do so may well result in misperception or failure to notice morally relevant features. It is difficult to see how the mere possession of a set of principles or rules is in any way causally efficacious in such as task, especially if it is accompanied by a reluctance to look again, in the dogged belief that one’s take on the situation is indisputable.

All of this requires a rich vocabulary of thick moral concepts. If one’s use of such moral appraisals is not to become habitual or predictable, one has to be prepared not only to pay close attention to each and every moral situation with which one is confronted, but also to attend with a degree of care and concern. Qualities of character associated with empathy and care, while not only more likely to result in attention that is more nuanced and accurate, are themselves not open to behaviouristic analysis.

Becoming a ‘better person’ involves more than sensitivity to reasons. A good person is not someone who merely subscribes to the rational requirement of treating others as her moral equal; more is required if her convictions are to be anything other than purely formal. Someone may well concede that women are the moral equals of men, while continuing to react adversely when encountering women in authority. As Williams points out: ‘We see a man’s genuine convictions as somewhere deeper within him than [a mere decision to adopt … a principle]’ (1973: 227); there being more to the moral life than rational choice and voluntary assent to principles or rules, and why there is more to being a good boy or girl than ‘doing the right thing’.

A full appreciation of moral significance has an emotional underpinning insofar as emotions have a major epistemic role in identifying morally relevant features. They are equally crucial to a full and proper understanding of oneself and one’s motives, as well as having a role in one’s deliberations and judgments. They play a prominent part in one’s willingness to look again, as well as in the extent to which one cares about that to which one attends. They also serve as a means by which value is disclosed.25

Questions relating to the ways in which we might become more caring, more sensitive, and more articulate in terms of how we characterise a moral situation, are largely empirical; but any ‘programme’ of moral education that ignores the role of affect in the moral life, is a recipe for disaster; hence the need for greater clarity in relation to the education of the emotions, given their foundational role in the responses, values, concerns and qualities of character identified by Bakhurst at the beginning of this paper. The very least that is required of those responsible for moral education, is to provide children with opportunities to pay close attention to the moral reality confronting them - an attention requiring a willingness to focus as much on their inner lives and the ways in which it might result in thoughtlessness, selfishness, and general insensitivity to the needs of others. They also need to be provided with opportunities for counterfactual thinking - what would I, or any other person have done instead - as well as ‘hypothetical forward looking narratives that have to be thought through’ (Goldie, 2007: 6).

Where bias and prejudice exist, it is important that these are identified and addressed; but unless and until children are required to attend ‘common schools’ in which parental wealth or religious affiliation are immaterial, there is a genuine danger that such a task will be doubly difficult. After all, it is not only inappropriate emotions that are responsible for distortions in one’s view of moral reality; social and cultural factors are equally instrumental in creating deeply ingrained racial, religious and class-based prejudices which, for many people, add to the difficulties faced when trying to see others from a just or loving perspective; witness the snobbery associated with M’s initial distorted view of D, or the racism of Huck. While M had to resort to a lot of soul-searching in order to re-evaluate her perception of D, Huck’s perception of Jim as something other than Miss Watson’s property, would have been more or less impossible were it not for the fact that they were playmates. Hiving off

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25 For a persuasive account of how this is possible, see Daniel Vanello (2018).
children into faith or private schools, though not necessarily resulting in blind prejudice towards others, does nothing to help in the task of familiarising them with the lives of those unlike their own; something so obviously essential if the distorted visions associated with prejudice and stereotyping are to be overcome. As Sherman says, ‘it is through collaboration on projects and through listening to and identifying with the viewpoints of others [that] an agent’s vision becomes enlarged’ (1989: 30).

Enlargement of vision is precisely what is required - the promotion of which being infinitely more challenging and rewarding than simply trying to ensure that children conform to the straight and narrow - if the parental aspirations to which Bakhurst refers, are to secure any prospect of realisation.

References


