Attention as Perception:
Theodor W. Adorno, Iris Murdoch, and the Ethical-Political Concept of Love

Abstract

This paper explores the ethical and political meaning of the concept of love in Theodor W. Adorno’s and in Iris Murdoch’s philosophy. It argues that despite the contextual and disciplinary differences between Adorno’s critical social theory and Murdoch’s analytic moral philosophy, both shared a distinct concept of love as “knowledge of the individual”: as perception of and attention to the internal, individual reality of the other. It is such concept of love, the paper shows, that allows for an understanding of love as “conscious opposition” to the social forces that induce instrumental relationships, blindness to particularities, prejudice, and indifference. Illuminating love’s capacity to resist these forces, and addressing the obstacles it confronts, the paper suggests a reading of Murdoch’s moral philosophy from the perspective of critical theory, and Adorno’s critical theory as a form of moral Platonism.

Word Count: 2999 (excluding abstract, footnotes and bibliography)
“Love,” Theodor W. Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia*, “is the capacity to perceive the similar in the dissimilar.”¹ Love, for Adorno, is a “capacity” that is indispensable for ethical life and social practice, but at the same time has become almost impossible in modern, alienated mass society. A similar diagnosis on the ethical centrality of love can be found in Iris Murdoch’s moral philosophy. “Love,” she writes in *The Sovereignty of Good*, “is knowledge of the individual” and hence “a central concept in morals.”² For Murdoch, love has a unique moral and ethical meaning. It allows for attention to the other’s most subjective, intimate, and often hidden internal sphere, without requiring transparency or disclosure. It is a way of morally relating to the other’s dissimilarity, which implies at the same time empathy and responsibility. This paper discusses the ethical-political concept of love in Adorno and Murdoch, focuses on the problems posited to such concept by social relations, prejudice, and intolerance, and argues for the capability of love to resist and oppose such oppressive social forces. It thereby also illuminates a hitherto unexplored affinity between critical theory and analytic moral philosophy – an affinity confirmed by Murdoch’s own later writings on Adorno’s importance and his relevance to her own philosophical project.

1. **Adorno’s Love: Ethical Ideality and Social Reality in *Minima Moralia***

In Adorno’s writings on ethics and politics, love plays a central – although often inconspicuous – role. Adorno’s concept of Love expresses a tension between its ethical ideal and the social reality by which it is at the same time, as J.M. Bernstein writes, “formed

---


and deformed.” Love is necessary for ethical life, for a moral relation to the other as a subject, but at the same time, in late capitalist society, it is rendered impossible, reduced to instrumental relations of power interests. This tension, or antinomical understanding of love, is the red thread that runs through Adorno’s work – from the early texts on Kierkegaard to several “reflections on damaged life” in Minima Moralia, up to his lectures on political education after the Holocaust, where love is a again, an essential political idea.4

In the negative aphorisms of Minima Moralia, Adorno comes very close to providing an – almost positive – account of that which has become impossible in the reified, alienated social reality he describes. Love, as “the capacity to perceive the similar in the dissimilar,” is a mode of perception, a form of cognition that allows for an insight (literally: as a “looking into”) – cognitive as much as moral – into the particularity of the other. As such, it breaks all boundaries of cognition: In the perception of love, the perceiving lover allows for the dissimilarity of the beloved to remain intact, acknowledging the similarity without imposing oneself or one’s own subjectivity on the other’s.

Beyond this rather abstract, aphoristic statement, Minima Moralia includes various reflections on the ethical-political meaning of love and its social and political “deformations.” In what follows, I will illustrate this by discussing a few of these reflections, but it is important to note that all references to love in the book are negative and aporetic: they address the essentiality of love as both emotion and cognition, and its impossibility and disintegration in instrumental society.

---

3 J.M. Bernstein, Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 2001, 51. In a footnote on the topic, Bernstein explains the problematic of love in Adorno and points to Murdoch as the counter-thesis: “Love approximates cognition, to the extent to which the evaluation of the beloved appears to derive from a full and attentive (perceptual) response; which is what gives rise to the converse thesis, namely, that the most accurate and just perception of an other is given through a ‘loving’ regard. For a suspiciously transcendent reading of the converse thesis, see Iris Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good.” (50n12)

In the aphorism “With all my worldly goods,” reflecting on divorce and the disintegration of love, Adorno portrays the ways in which social reality pervades the ethical ideality of love and turns it upside down, violently deforming it:

It is as if the sphere of intimacy, the unwatchful trust of shared life, is transformed into a malignant poison as soon as the relationship in which it flourished is broken off. Intimacy between people is forbearance, tolerance, refuge for idiosyncrasies. If dragged into the open, it reveals the moment of weakness in it [...] Things which were once signs of loving care, images of reconciliation, breaking loose as independent values, show their evil, cold, pernicious side.

Whereas romantic love ideally allows for the greatest intimacy, trust, “refuge for idiosyncrasies” as the lovers’ mutual confidence in one another, exposing their most personal distinctive and even eccentric sides, the social reality that infiltrates the sphere of intimacy after the romance has faded, renders the very idea of romantic love almost impossible, “it reveals the moment of weakness in it.” Love as an ethical ideal is supposed to grant the couple strength and protection from the outside world, from social reality, but this very social reality intrudes – and always resides at the threshold of – the intimate romantic sphere.

Adorno expresses this dialectic of romantic love in terms of the Hegelian struggles between the universal and the particular.

If marriage offers one of the last possibilities of forming human cells within universal inhumanity, the universal takes revenge in the breakdown of marriage, laying hands on what had seemed excepted from the rule, subjugating it to the alienated orders of rights and property and deriding those who had lived in delusive security.

---

5 MM, 31
6 MM, 31
Any attempt to retreat into the intimate sphere of love, to escape the alienating social order, to thus be “excepted from the rule,” is susceptible to the “revenge of the universal,” it falls prey to societal laws and demands which can invade at any time.

Such dialectic is most evident with the loss of love. It is precisely the loss of love that reveals the mechanism of the interplay between universal and particular, and the capacity of love to provide a certain knowledge and perception.

Someone who has been [romantically] offended, slighted […] becomes aware that in the innermost blindness of love, that must remain obvious, lives a demand not to be blinded. He was wronged; from this he deduces a claim to right and must at the same time reject it, for what he desires can only be given in freedom. In such distress he who is rebuffed becomes human.7

The loss of love, Adorno maintains, reveals the particular’s claim to justice: to the right not to be blinded by love; and at the same time it entails the realization that such claim cannot be sustained. This experience is eye-opening because the sufferer understands the mechanism of powerlessness at the core of love: the simultaneity of desire for independence and freedom, and the lack of such freedom.

In another aphorism, entitled “Constanze” (referring both to the heroine of Mozart’s opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio* and to Mozart’s wife), Adorno unfolds the dialectical meaning of love as both an experience of subjective, spontaneous immediacy that opposes bourgeois society and as a compliant tool of this very society.

Everywhere bourgeois society insists on the exertion of will; only love is supposed to be involuntary, pure immediacy of feeling. In its longing for this, which means a dispensation from work, the bourgeois idea of love transcends bourgeois society.

---

7 MM, 164
[...] The very involuntariness of love, even where it has not found itself a practical accommodation beforehand, contributes to the whole as soon as it is established as a principle. If love in society is to represent a better one, it cannot do so as a peaceful enclave, but only by conscious opposition. 

Adorno transforms the concept of love to insist on its ethical and political relevance, not in independence from society but as “conscious opposition” to it. But what kind of moral knowledge can love provide for the quest for ethical life in the face of alienated social reality? How can love evade the social powers that instrumentalize it ever more fastidiously and turn against the social reality in which it actually takes place? How can love – understood either ethically or politically – “represent a better society” by “conscious opposition” to the existing one?

2. Murdoch’s Attention: Knowledge of the Individual and Moral Perfectibility in *The Sovereignty of Good*

Here, I think, Iris Murdoch’s deliberations on the meaning of love as knowledge and its role in modern moral philosophy become pertinent to an understanding of Adorno’s moral argument, namely as a form of moral Platonism. At the same time, reading Murdoch’s moral philosophy from the perspective of Adorno’s critical concept of love sheds light on the critical-theoretical dimensions of her understanding of love as attention to individual reality.

As opposed to other analytic moral philosophers, who focus on the givenness of mental states and their relation to moral values, Murdoch suggests in *The Sovereignty of Good* a Platonic understanding of moral values as independently existing ideas we can *strive* for as *perfectible* beings. Although this might at first appear far removed from

---

8 MM, 172
Adorno’s seemingly pessimist critical theory, a close look at Murdoch’s argument helps to reveal the Platonic dimension of Adorno’s own moral theory: The flaws, maladies, and moral pathologies of society, which Adorno unfolds in Minima Moralia, can only be detected in the light of – in contrast to – these ethical ideals and their practice in social reality. This pertains most definitely to the concept of love.

Murdoch draws on Simone Weil’s religious existentialist ethics, employing the concept of attention, “to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality.”9 Attention, in Weil and Murdoch’s use of the term, means a form of perception comparable to Adorno’s “perception of the similar in the dissimilar.” As a “just and loving gaze,” it is directed at the subjectivity of the other, of the dissimilar, recognizing – at the same time – their difference and similarity, recognizing the self in the non-self.

Murdoch exemplifies the active process of attention as an inner strive for moral perfection in the story of M and D, the centerpiece of The Sovereignty of Good. In this story, M is a mother and D is her daughter-in-law, to whom she feels a certain hostility.

M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. […] M does not like D’s accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him.10

M conveys none of these views and opinions to D or anyone else, she “behaves beautifully to the girl throughout.”11 Murdoch focuses on the mental and moral process the mother undergoes, actively modifying her relation to her daughter-in-law. It is important to note here, however, that by focusing on the internal dimension of morality, Murdoch does not attend to the social reality, namely, to the fact that the mother’s attitude draws from, is in

---

9 SG, 33. See also Simone Weil., Gravity and Grace. Trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr. Intro. Gustave Thibon. London and New York: Routledge 1947/2002: 116-122. For Weil,” as Sabina Lovibond explains, “the concept of attention has a general epistemological significance not limited to ethics: active enquiry, strenuous attempts at problem solving, are in her view over-rated, serving only to ‘clear the ground’ […] There is a kind of attention which is bound up not with the will but with our consent to receive illumination or insight.” Sabina Lovibond, Iris Murdoch, Gender, and Philosophy. London and New York: Routledge 2011: 30
10 SG, 16-17.
11 SG, 17
fact immersed in, the social reality of bias and prejudice, class difference, probably also in cultural and social predispositions. (One is inclined to ponder how the narrative might have been affected by the young girl’s possibly different ethnic origin, religion, or race: Whether the mother’s attitude could have been impacted to such prejudices.)

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 [sic!] 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.’

Giving a “careful and just attention” and “looking again” allows M to undertake an internal, mental change with regard to D.

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.

This internal change may have various reasons, but the crucial fact is that it is externally imperceptible. “M has in the interim been active, she has been doing something,” Murdoch adds, emphasizing that M has been internally active. “M looks at D, she attends to D, she focuses her attention. M is engaged in internal struggle.” Looking at and attending to D is what allows M to undergo such moral change of a mental state. It allows her to set aside and challenge the social reality – the bias, prejudice, predispositions, and narrow-mindedness – that informed her initial attitude toward D.

---

12 SG, 17.
13 SG, 17.
14 SG, 19.
15 SG, 22; emphasis in original.
Such strive for moral perfection, a perfectioning of our relation to the other, is made possible through the epistemological gain made by attention as a “just and loving gaze.”\textsuperscript{16} This is the context in which Murdoch states that “love is knowledge of the individual”\textsuperscript{17} – it is a perception made possible by attention to individual reality. “When M is just and loving she sees D as she really is.”\textsuperscript{18} M succeeds in breaking through the social reality – one may say: breaking through the social delusion that imposes epistemological bias, prejudice, and narrow-mindedness - social phenomena which, according to Murdoch as well as to Adorno, induce blindness to the individual reality, and suffering, of the other. Attention as a loving gaze allows to see the other as they really are: It is knowledge of the individual as “perception of the similar in the dissimilar.” In a similar vein to Adorno, Murdoch conceives of love as the capacity to see, to perceive.

It is now worthwhile to return to Adorno’s reflections on love, which Murdoch’s argument complement and elucidate. “Love,” as Adorno writes in the aphorism “Constanze,” “is supposed to be involuntary, pure immediacy of feeling.”\textsuperscript{19} Nevertheless, in the given social reality, in which love is “established as a principle,” it is part of the same system of instrumentality and domination, of what Murdoch calls “the proliferation of blinding self-centered aims and images.”\textsuperscript{20} At the same time, he maintains, in the passage I quoted earlier, that “if love in society is to represent a better one, it cannot do so as a peaceful enclave, but only by conscious opposition.”\textsuperscript{21} Love can be a conscious opposition to oppressive, biased social reality, it can counteract the system of delusion if it is practiced in the way both Adorno and Murdoch see its ethical ideality, namely, as attention by “real

\textsuperscript{16} This idea of moral perfection through epistemological attention is diametrically opposed to the moral theory of recognition, since it eliminates the cognitive and practical hierarchical value difference between the cognizant and recognized. Whereas in theories of recognition – from Hegel to Honneth – the cognizant actively recognizes the passive object of recognition, hence asserts power and domination over the latter, Murdoch’s theory seems to counteract such hierarchy of power precisely by setting aside the subjective will and focusing the attention on the beloved, on the object of love, as Adorno calls it, on “the primacy of the object.” See Adorno, Negative Dialectics. Trans. E.B. Ashton. London and New York: Continuum, 1973: 188.
\textsuperscript{17} SG, 27.
\textsuperscript{18} SG, 36.
\textsuperscript{19} MM, 172.
\textsuperscript{20} SG, 65.
\textsuperscript{21} MM, 172.
looking,” as perception of the similar in the dissimilar. But what does this mean, practically?

“When M is just and loving she sees D as she really is”: Attending to D’s individual reality, M gains knowledge of D as an individual, a knowledge that transcends – that actively challenges social normativities, bias, prejudice, and delusion. The task of moral perfection M engages in involves suspending the social mechanisms of blindness and delusion. It is a “conscious opposition” to society, which – by questioning the way society imposes on us modes of seeing that are regressive, discriminatory, and morally blind – “represents a better society”: that is, love as attention and as perception of the similar in the dissimilar allows us to strive for an accordance between ethical ideality and social reality. Murdoch’s Platonism, accordingly, substantially applies to Adorno’s critical social theory, which can likewise be considered a form of moral Platonism. For both, Love is an idea that, even if rendered (almost) impossible in given society, potentially exists in reality and, as ethical ideality, can guides us, perfectible beings, as something to aspire to, both ethically and epistemologically: gaining perception of the other by attending to their internal reality, to their dissimilarity, in a “just and loving gaze.” Such attention as perception makes “conscious opposition” to socially induced blindness possible.

3. Murdoch’s Adorno: Moral Platonism as Critical Theory of Love

More than 20 years after The Sovereignty of Good, in her magnum opus Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, Murdoch returns to the argument on love as attention and perception. Notably, it is in this context that she explicitly discusses Adorno’s ethical and political thought.22 Murdoch emphasizes Adorno’s “concern for the contingent individual, as social

---

22 In some of her letters published in Living on Paper: Letters from Iris Murdoch 1934-1995 (Ed. Avril Horner and Anne Rowe. London: Chatto & Windus 2015), Murdoch expresses her appreciation of the Frankfurt School, and particularly of Adorno, who, as she fondly notes, “was once long ago in Oxford […] before my time!” (Murdoch, 2015: 547-548 and 589). Adorno spent time at Oxford University between 1934-1938, having escaped Germany, working on Husserl’s phenomenology under the supervision of Gilbert Ryle.
unit, as human person, as idea, as work of art, as plant, as animal, as planet [...] details of our world [which] deserve our respectful and loving attention.”

Here she practically connects Adorno’s concern for the contingent individual with the idea of attention she presented in *The Sovereignty of Good*, as “the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality.”

Setting Adorno’s critical theory in the context of moral Platonism allows for a new understanding of his ethical and political thought from a new and refreshing perspective. It sheds light on his critical diagnoses about the essentiality and, at the same time, impossibility of love as an ethical-political concept. Murdoch addresses the utopian dimension in Adorno’s thought, which she compares to the Platonic “idea of perfection.”

The Utopianism which leads [Adorno] to picture a ‘good happiness’ [...] is a moral aspiration, not a predication about a perfect society. It is a message to the individual.24

Murdoch explains Adorno’s ethical and political thought, which criticizes the shortcomings of existing society according to some form of utopian understanding of happiness, in a moral Platonic sense. Such utopianism is akin to Platonic ideas, which exist in reality as “ideas of perfection,” as “moral aspirations,” as guidelines for human *perfectible* beings. This is connected, for Adorno, as Murdoch explains, to “the idea of a good (perhaps unattainable) society working perpetually in the minds of properly intentioned people: a regulative idea which reaches back to Plato’s ideal city.”25 The moral Platonic idea of the good, achievable by perception of and attention to the other’s individual reality, is the regulative idea in Adorno’s critical theory, according to Murdoch: an idea we can individually and socially aspire to. She relates it to Adornos’ “concern with human suffering [which] tends, paradoxically, to do this too: to consider suffering is to consider

24 MGM, 378.
25 MGM, 243
what is individual, private, unintelligible and contingent.” Adorno’s utopianism – the recognition that contemporary social reality prevents the establishment of the ethical ideality of love as attention and perception, as knowledge of the individual – means for Murdoch a constant strive for perfection, for attention to individual reality, to contingency and suffering.

The ethical-political concept of love that both Adorno and Murdoch suggest thus remains committed to the concrete social reality and avoids fading into abstract, objectifying self-righteousness. Its ethical ideality may be a form of moral Platonism, but since it addresses a given social reality, it is at the same time an ideal and a criterion for social critique. Murdoch and Adorno’s moral Platonism can hence be considered the foundation of a critical theory of love.

Bibliography


---

26 MGM, 374


