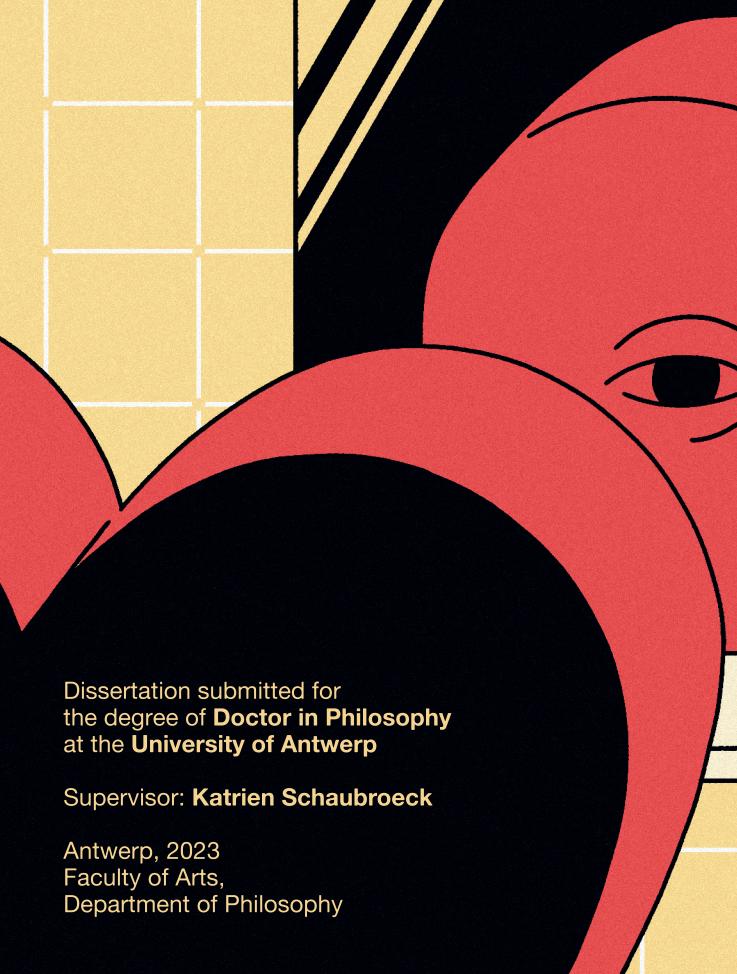


Love & Morality

Taking Iris
different places



Lotte
Spreeuwenberg

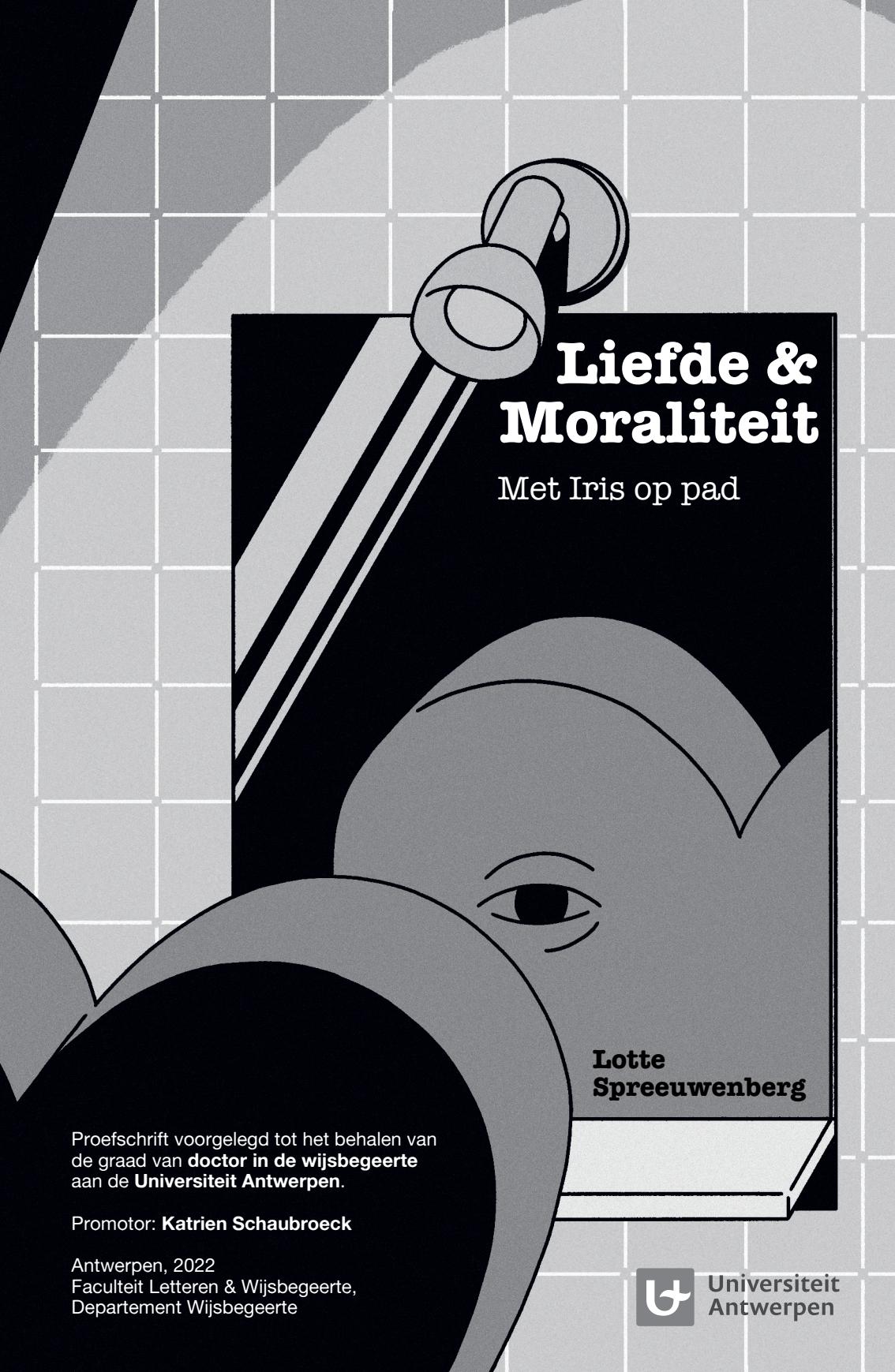
Dissertation submitted for
the degree of **Doctor in Philosophy**
at the **University of Antwerp**

Supervisor: **Katrien Schaubroeck**

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Faculty of Arts,
Department of Philosophy



Universiteit
Antwerpen



Liefde & Moraliteit

Met Iris op pad

Lotte
Spreeuwenberg

Proefschrift voorgelegd tot het behalen van
de graad van **doctor in de wijsbegeerte**
aan de **Universiteit Antwerpen**.

Promotor: **Katrien Schaubroeck**

Antwerpen, 2022
Faculteit Letteren & Wijsbegeerte,
Departement Wijsbegeerte



Universiteit
Antwerpen

“I’m [...] talking about the distinction between what ought and what is. So many are living in the realm of ought, and trans people, we’re living here in *is*. And we’re saying gender diversity is what *is*.”

Writer, poet and performance artist Alok Vaid-Menon

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Contents

Abbreviations	8
Preface	11
Introduction: new Murdochian perspectives	23
Aim and overview	24
Iris Murdoch in context	27
Love	27
Imperfection and progression	32
Contemporary Murdochian thought	35
Political?	37
Feminist?	40
A new Murdochian perspective: philosophy of love	44
Love versus morality	44
Moral love, but different	49
A new Murdochian perspective: social justice	58
Collective self-serving fantasies	59
Epistemology	61
From fantasy to reality	65
Attention politics and false suns	66
From individual to social	69
Worries about unselfing	72
A note about ‘looking’	75
Contemporary case studies and applications	78
The love enhancement debate	78
Cancel culture	84
Conclusion	87

The papers	89	Bibliography	198
1. The Possibility of a Duty to Love	91	List of publications	209
Introduction	93		
A different conception of obligations	95	Acknowledgements	211
Reasons for love	99		
Controlling emotions	103	Summary	214
The motivation for love	107	Samenvatting	216
Conclusion	111		
2. Love as a Practice: Looking at Real People	113		
An ameliorative project	115		
Love, value and looking	116		
Love as passivity: unrealistic images and fantasies	121		
Love as an ongoing practice: steering away from the ego	124		
Real people vs. fantasies	125		
The ongoing practice: getting to know versus knowledge	131		
3. Taking the Love Pill: A Reply to Naar and Nyholm	139		
The recent debate	141		
Taking the love pill for different ends	143		
The desirability of the love pill	145		
Love potions	147		
Concluding discussion: love, freedom and commitment	149		
4. The Non-individualistic and Social Dimension of Love Drugs	153		
Introduction	155		
Love as a psychological condition	155		
Love as a practice	159		
Love as an interpersonal and social practice	163		
Individual happiness versus moral and social progression	169		
5. The Moral Implications of Cancel Culture	175		
Introduction	177		
The case of Carissa Pinkston	178		
Cancelling as (social) punishment	180		
A different kind of cancelling: removing privileged access	185		
Punishment vs. redistribution: the case of the privileged	188		
Drawing implications: the Pinkston case	193		
Cancel culture: problematic?	195		

Abbreviations

Abbreviations for Murdoch's non-fictional writings are given below. For the three essays (IP, OGG and SGC) that make up *The Sovereignty of Good*, page references are given to the reprint (2001) of the 1970 book publication. Other works are referenced, where possible, to the reprints of Murdoch's philosophical works in the collection *Existentialists and Mystics* (1997/1999), edited by Peter J. Conradi. This is not an exhaustive list of Murdoch's non-fictional writings. It contains solely the works that are cited in this dissertation.

- E&M *Existentialists and Mystics* (1997/1999), edited by Peter J. Conradi
HT 'A House of Theory' (1958), E&M, pp. 171-186
IP 'The Idea of Perfection' (1964), SOG, pp. 1-44
KV 'Knowing the Void' (1956a), E&M, pp. 157-160
MGM *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992)
OGG 'On 'God' and 'Good'' (1969), SOG, pp. 45-74
S&G 'The Sublime and the Good' (1959a), E&M, pp. 205-220
SBR 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' (1959b), E&M, pp. 261-286
SGC 'The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts' (1967),
SOG, pp. 75-101
SOG *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970/2001)
VCM 'Vision and Choice in Morality' (1956b), E&M, pp. 76-98

Abbreviations for the papers that make up this dissertation are listed below. While the abbreviations of Murdoch's works consist of letters, abbreviations of my papers consist of two letters and the number of the paper, to make a clear distinction.

- DL1 The Possibility of a Duty to Love
LP2 'Love' as a Practice: Looking at Real People
TP3 Taking the Love Pill: A Reply to Naar and Nyholm
LD4 The Non-Individualistic and Social Dimension of Love
Drugs
CC5 The Moral Implications of Cancel Culture

Preface

In 2018, in the cold and festive days between Christmas and New Year's Eve, a contemporary art exhibition took place in a rather odd location. In a small town in the Dutch provinces, a local community of artists had gotten the local church so far as to open their doors for a non-religious activity, which, until then, was highly unusual for this particular area and this particular church. These are the busiest days of the year for the church, still 23 artists were welcome to showcase their installations. The artists were invited by art collective ZEEN to enter into dialogue with the church building, its inventory and to confront the institution church and religion in general for three days. The exhibition took place in the Sint Lambertus church in Horst, the biggest church of the biggest village of a municipality that consists of sixteen small villages often referred to as 'kerkdorpjes', which would translate to 'little church villages'.

The religious history of the place should not be lost on us here. I grew up Catholic in one of these 'kerkdorpjes'. I was baptized and participated in two other Catholic rituals at the age of seven (holy communion) and eleven (holy confirmation). My participation in these rituals did not come from the wish to be Catholic, but simply from the fact that everyone of my age that I knew was participating. There was no real pressure involved: my parents asked me and my siblings whether we wanted to be Catholic and emphasized that it was our own choice. I think we never really considered opting out, which would mean to stand out, be excluded from certain classes at our Catholic school (the only school in a small town of two thousand inhabitants), and most important for us at the time: which child says "no" to a party with family visiting and bringing them gifts? There were no religious motives at all.

While religion did not play a big role in my daily life, I was brought up with the idea that – if I chose to believe in such a thing – God could be a source of love. Furthermore, I grew up thinking that morality and religion are inextricably linked. I read children's bibles containing beautiful pictures with the same eagerness as I did with large, heavy and fascinating books full of fairy-tales. I considered them the same genre. I still think they are not so far apart: both consist in stories that discuss the important questions of life

and have as their goal to communicate a morale. And in most children's bibles' stories everyone *does* live happily ever after.

Somewhere along this path, I had gotten the idea that love was the most important value and that religion (and in my world this was Catholicism) was the ideology portraying that. Maybe it is fair to say that, in hindsight, my religious upbringing by my parents was a bit one-sided. They cherrypicked what they thought important: love and equality is something good, selfishness and oppression is something bad. My siblings and I spent our childhood listening to Pink Floyd and Bob Marley and the Wailers, our parents' favourites. My mom played the guitar and sang an occasional religious song which she had performed in church when she was younger. The house was full of self-made art including a massive artwork in the living room portraying a large peace sign with a white dove. It is fair to say that my upbringing with the phrase 'loving is good' was not only inspired by Christian religion, but also had a certain 'make love not war'-aesthetic to it. To this day it is a family ritual to watch the seventies rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* every Easter.

For me, as a child, morality was about love and togetherness. I just made the mistake thinking this was what the Catholic church is all about, too. Later in life I was disappointed by what the church (and perhaps Christianity or religion in general) had to offer. I deregistered from the Catholic register as a teenager. I don't think my friends or peers put much thought into it and just left their religious history for what it was: a cultural tradition of a bygone era. But I was disappointed. How could an institution that takes love as its core value be so exclusive? It started with personal questions. How could an ideology of love exclude my queer identity?

It was only later that I understood the full terror my grandparents had experienced, brought upon them by the all-powerful church at the time.¹ While state and church had been separated by law in 1848 in the Netherlands, the power of the church as the only real authority in these small countryside villages extended far into the second half of the twentieth century. Upon her marriage, in the late 1950s, my grandmother Annie and grandfather Gerrit received a booklet from the pastor containing codes of conduct. Among other things it reads that 'woman' is created as a suitable helper for her man.

¹ For the section on my grandparents I draw from Spreeuwenberg, L., Van Dam, M., e.a. (2022). *Onderhuidse Verhalen: Essays over verleden en vervreemding*. ISVW Uitgevers. All translations are mine, the original text is in Dutch.

As young women, both my grandmothers joined the local women's union. A spiritual adviser's approval of the policy and planned activities of the union was deemed necessary by the church. The rector, the religious authority, made extensive use of these opportunities. The union had to invite religious figures for lectures titled 'Woman's Duty as Wife and Mother', or 'The Peasant Woman's Moral Task'. As late as 1953 there were lectures such as 'The task in the family is the first and great task of the mother [...] Father in charge, mother serving love, goodness'. In 1955 the chaplain ordered that 'the woman and the cat must stay at home'. My grandmothers were about my age at the time: Lies was 36, Annie was 21. My upbringing by my parents conveying that love and equality is something good, selfishness and oppression something bad, was no longer something I could reconcile with religion or the institution church.

So when I was asked to participate in an art exhibition that would take place in one of these churches, I was intrigued. The exhibition was called 'Altaarnatief', with the Dutch 'altaar' meaning 'altar' (the communion table in church), and 'alternatief' meaning 'alternative' (an English translation would thus be 'Altarnative'). I asked one of the organizers of the exhibition whether there were limits or constraints for the art that I would present. There were none so far and the organization was curious about testing their limits, too. The artists were specifically invited to be confrontational.

How critical could I be? This was not a question of fear. Contrary to my grandparents' life, the church had little authority over me. It was more a question of *pedagogy* and at the same time rebellion or *activism*. How could I make a statement that would not be too shocking that receivers would shut themselves off to the message, but at the same time a little rebellious as to convey anything I wanted to say?

I decided to make a parody on the local recycling system. The local recycling system is one of the most innovative in the country – or so the municipality claims. This seems like an arbitrary local fact, but one has to take into account that the municipality takes enormous pride in their recycling system and uses it as a marketing tool to stand out. In the spirit of the slogan 'everything can be recycled', I decided to take this as a given and apply it to things that were not meant to be included in 'everything'.

The art installation was named ‘Ideeënaafval’, which translates to ‘Idea Garbage’. Upon entering the main large room of the church, one could see a sober table – its size and sobriety a little out of place with the rest of the Catholic decor. Behind the table were the numerous wooden benches facing the altar, and imposing pillars next to stained glass windows reaching towards the sky. The art installation was positioned in the back of the church: where one enters and leaves. Upon the table were two recycling bins: a paper recycling bin and the local signature ‘green bucket’, in which one can dispose garden and kitchen waste to leave to rot. On the table were also numerous blank pieces of paper and some markers. Scattered on the table were bibles (old and new), the children’s bibles I had enjoyed in my childhood, my grandparents’ booklet with codes of conduct, and more literature that conveyed religious – and in this particular local context, Catholic – ideas. The description of the interactive installation read the following (my translation):

The influence of religion in our lives has decreased enormously. We feel liberated, especially because many religions were (and some still are) power-driven institutions, and religious ideologies have been (and are) used for centuries to oppress particular groups of people – for example women or those who identify as LGBTQ+.

But does this liberation come at a cost? *Idea Garbage* questions what we lose in the process of letting go of the rules imposed by religion. Love seems to have a place in every religion. The commandment ‘love thy neighbour’ is seen as the core of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Love also has a central function in Buddhism and Hinduism, because it is seen as ‘the good’, ‘being unselfish’ or giving up selfishness. Have we lost a sense of togetherness in exchange for the freedom of individualism?

Idea Garbage invites you to recycle religious ideas. What ideas do we want to modernize and take with us? And which ideas should we leave to rot in our ‘green bucket’? Given societal changes such as polarization, segregation, the seeking of black sheep, hatred for others, growing individualization and living in our so-called ‘bubble’: could we use a modernized version of religion instead of throwing it all in the trash?

I formulated my critique in the most positive question possible: are we letting go of something valuable, when we let go of religion? Visitors of the

exhibition could use the religious literature for inspiration, write down which ideas they wanted to keep or dispose, and throw them in the corresponding bin.

For me, personally, this was about love and its place in morality, but for the visitors it could be about other concepts. For me the installation was about religion not always having succeeded in taking love as its core value. *Could we think of an ideology or morality of love, without the inegalitarian or oppressive rules that religion historically has imposed on us? What would such a morality look like? Can we think of an argument that claims that loving is good? What kind of love should this consist in? And how can or should we implement it in our daily practical lives?*

During the *Altaarnatief* exhibition, I was not the only participating artist that questioned the church, or religion in general. For example: one installation contained a self-opinionated garden gnome that continuously was blaring through the entire church: ‘Ik ben het licht’, which translates to ‘I am the light’. The church and the local dean were open to all of this. However, there turned out to be a limit to what the church allowed. One of the artists was not allowed to showcase their art. More precisely – and I think more problematic – in the end they were allowed to showcase their installation, but not to perform the show they had planned.

Teun Seuren, a young and successful fashion designer who grew up in the same vicinity, wanted to exhibit his collection *I Decline* in a show specifically designed for *Altaarnatief*. *I Decline* represents the battle of inclusion that queer people still have to fight today. In researching and showcasing this concept, Seuren questions the compatibility of homosexuality and religion. The collection is a statement about being allowed to be your full and true self, and at the same time, being able to choose whether and what you believe.

Ironically, Seuren was not allowed to perform the show. The local dean of the church prohibited the fashion show, with support of the diocese. The organization of the art exhibition were however quick to respond, and set up an additional location. Next to the church – literally ten meters from it – an empty building was temporarily squatted in which Seuren’s show took place multiple times during the three day exhibition. Visitors of *Altaarnatief* were invited to leave the church when Seuren’s show would start. It was an act of rebellion in itself to collectively leave the church to go watch a queer art and fashion show featuring several queer models.

What I deem particularly problematic about the decision to prohibit Seuren's show, is the decision to allow critical art in general, but not this particular show by these particular people. While some explained the situation as Seuren's art being too critical, this was not the case. The decision to prohibit the fashion show was not about censoring critical art. The church was open to several critical pieces, e.g. my installation which more or less had a similar theme, or the self-opinionated garden gnome, which – I am not sure whether it was intended that way – could be viewed by some as ridiculing the institution church or religion.

As a protest, Seuren and the exhibition-organization set up mannequins wearing Seuren's designs in the church, without negotiating this with the dean. The church however did not protest the dolls or designs, and Seuren's art in this particular form was allowed by the church during the entire exhibition. So while Seuren got to showcase his designs, the queer models and the queer designer himself were not allowed to wear them or perform in them. While (part of the) art was welcome, the artist and models were not. It was not about valuing art, it was about valuing human beings. It was a conscious decision to not recognize and embrace queer people as they are. Especially during these days of the 'spirit of Christmas', the message of neighbourly love suddenly felt hypocritical – again.

The results from my interactive art installation showed that participants felt the need to rethink love and morality: most of the torn, crumpled and daubed papers that were in the paper recycle bin at the end of the exhibition were about the value of love. Some of the papers contained writings of visitors who saw value in other ideas, such as symbolism or animation. Most papers in the 'green bucket' were about exclusion, oppression or power in general: ideas that, according to the participants, were not worth a life past recycling.

Of course I had set up the description of the installation in a way that focused on love and inclusion as the main topics. Furthermore, Seuren being prohibited to perform his show probably influenced the results. Still the responses were beyond my expectations. Togetherness and love were often mentioned, with a lot of the papers including a scribbled equivalent of a footnote clarifying that this would include 'love for *all!*' or making clear that 'this means *everyone*', and not just particular dominant/privileged groups. There were moving statements and personal stories containing both beautiful

and heart-breaking experiences.

I was not surprised by the need for a loving morality – the art installation was specifically set up for such a result – but I *was* surprised by the emotions involved. I thought of the installation's set up as a little research station: the bibles and booklets being the literature, the visitors being the researchers, assessing what's useful from the literature and what is not, categorizing this data in two bins, resulting in a list of ideas valuable enough to take with us going forward. I had not foreseen that the act of recycling became a ritual in itself, with psychologically positive effects.

Visitors were surprised by this too, as they explained what relief they had felt writing down the things that bothered them – sometimes had bothered them for over eighty years! – then crush the paper with a certain anger, throw it away and 'leave it to rot'. They said it felt good to leave these experiences here, in the church, leaving the exhibition thinking about love and inclusion without the 'garbage ideas' they had just disposed weighing them down any longer. I was moved, not least by the occasional watery eyes of 80-something women who could tell entire stories in very little words.

I like to think these emotional responses to the installation gave away how great the need for love and the need for absence of oppression really was for some of them. My personal philosophical questions – mentioned above – proved to be not just theoretical questions or abstract thought experiments. They were questions rooted in daily life, to which moral philosophy, moral psychology and feminist thought might provide answers.

This all happened late 2018. Little did I know that the themes I was researching through art, would become, in every sense, the main subject of my dissertation. I think I had read Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* by that time, but I understood very little of it. Although it was about the same concepts, I had no theoretical frame to articulate the resemblance.

In an edited volume about one of Murdoch's philosophical works, Nora Hämäläinen and Gilligan Dooley write: "Sometimes art is better and quicker than philosophy at picking up what is happening to us" (2019, p. 4). Murdoch herself says in a famous interview with Bryan Magee: "Our consciousness changes, and the change may appear in art before it receives its commentary in a theory" (E&M, p. 22). In some sense, the art installation preceded this dissertation and its main topics.

Why am I telling this story? I think it is important to give context to the philosophical questions and academic research that has resulted in this dissertation. I think we should not view academic philosophy as performing abstract research. Perhaps Murdoch would agree, and I will elaborate on this in the introductory chapter. First, let me continue the story, and explain why specifically Murdoch grabbed my attention.

My encounter with academic education happened fairly late, at 23 years old, having received practical education first, in teaching, journalism, and art. After one semester of premasters and two semesters of masters education – while simultaneously working as a community college teacher to pay for this education – I started my PhD. Furthermore, as sketched above: I grew up in a very small town, far removed from ‘the intellectual life’. My family has worked in agro-culture (grandparents’ generation), my father works as a nurse (in acquired brain injury healthcare) and my mother is an administrative worker for primary schools. The local community thrives on an ‘hands-on-mentality’, not so much on an academic one. I did not know anyone who worked (or had worked) in academia.² Most of my family and friends today aren’t aware of the difference between me publishing an op-ed in a newspaper or publishing an academic article – which of course is completely fine. It’s both writing and it’s both ‘arguing about something philosophical’. When I try to explain the different levels of working in academia they shake their heads in confusion and disapproval.

I did not know anything about the academic world. And I mean: nothing at all. In retrospect, I sometimes chuckle at the naivety with which I entered academia. In the six years of pursuing a PhD, I have made many discoveries about the academic environment, but worth noting here is this: I was surprised and somewhat disappointed by the power and elitism involved. Hierarchy, status, individualism, ego – they all play important parts in how research and education at the university is constructed. While reading Murdoch’s *The Sovereignty of Good*, I somehow felt relief. For me, she was proof that we *can* do philosophy differently.

I can see why this sounds strange to those who are familiar with Murdoch. Coming from a middle class background and attending Oxford from age

² With exception of a brilliant friend, who I grew up with (sharing a similar background) and who pursued a PhD in Applied Physics.

19, she writes about ‘ordinary people’ as ‘virtuous peasants’. This comes off rather condescending. Furthermore, her philosophical writing is not at all accessible to the ‘ordinary people’ she talks about, often being very elusive and involving a lot of name-dropping. In several works she distinguishes high from low art (SOG, S&G, E&M); high art referring to artists such as Tolstoy and Shakespeare. Murdoch comes off rather classist. Besides, there are many other philosophers, papers, books, professors or debates who could have told me that we can do philosophy with less hierarchy and individualism involved (and so later on I discovered debates such as feminism or decolonization). So let me explain the appeal of reading Murdoch in this context.

For me, Murdoch was the first encounter with a philosophical theory that put humility and love at the centre. In reading *The Sovereignty of Good* I first recognized a methodology that was about being humble and acknowledging that we, human beings, are imperfect. This concerns not only Murdoch’s thinking about morality, but also ‘doing philosophy’ itself. In 1968 Murdoch declared herself “profoundly bored with my thoughts, notably with the whole long (ten years long at least) train which led up to *The Sovereignty of Good*. Not that I think this is all ‘wrong’ but I just sense it as fearfully limited and partial” (quoted in Conradi, 2001, p. 501). I find her vulnerability refreshing, especially in an academic environment where ego and competition are common. Her ability to show vulnerability without losing the clearness and directness of her speech and writing is incredibly appealing to me.

In rereading *The Sovereignty of Good* and trying to write about it, I discovered that humility was not the only feature I liked. Morality, God/Good, love, human beings, discovering these themes through art...: it was all there in Murdoch’s philosophy. I recognized my own questions, a similar look on both the world and human beings.

I was also drawn by the Platonic nature of her writing. I have always been mesmerized by a particular experience I had as a child: the world looked different – I mean different on a revolutionary level – *before* getting glasses and *after*. This perfectly normal event – getting glasses – caused an explosion of questions in my childhood. Was I the only one who never knew what trees had really looked like all this time? Did I now see trees in their full truth or was this truth beyond my reach? And had everyone else always seen this truth or were we somehow all ignorant? (And which of those did I find

worse?) It was some twenty years later that I realized that this was a rather Platonic experience, the glasses providing me a world outside of the cave. I have always had questions about ‘looking’, ‘knowing’ and ‘truth’ and for Murdoch these are all important themes.

A fourth feature in Murdoch’s writing that grabbed my attention is her focus on the ‘common man’ and ‘real human beings’. I have experienced ‘doing academic philosophy’ largely as an elitist job in an elitist environment, often (too) far from ‘the real world’. Although many people and institutions try to be non-elitist in present day academia, it would be naïve to think their efforts can overturn centuries (or even millennia, looking at the ancients) of philosophy being a job of the elite. In this light, I find Murdoch’s claim “the unexamined life can be virtuous” (IP, SOG, p. 2) very appealing. This is not a self-evident assumption in academic philosophy. It must however be said that Murdoch herself would probably not view this claim in the same political light. She makes this claim as a critique against the dominant theories of her time: if our world is a world only of ‘hard’ scientific items, as her contemporaries argued, then persons in their full complexity will in a sense have no place in it.

Hannah Marije Altorf (2008) argues that in Murdoch’s earlier work she often positions herself as an outsider: Murdoch makes a clear distinction between the philosophical argument and ‘us’, “when we are not philosophising” (E&M, p. 33). The claim to speak from an ordinary position keeps returning in her philosophical writing. It is found in the frequent use of words like ‘simple’, ‘surely’ and ‘obvious’, as well as by acknowledging those outside the philosophical debate: the virtuous peasants, “some quiet unpretentious worker, a schoolteacher, or a mother, or better still an aunt” (MGM, p. 429). As noted above, Murdoch’s phrasing is somewhat condescending. Still I see political and moral value in this regard for ‘ordinary people’ and in the claim that we do not have to be philosophers – or academics, for that matter – to live a virtuous life.

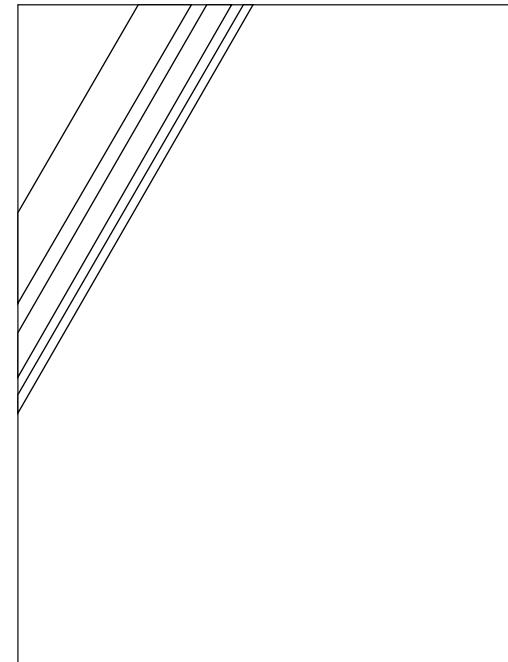
A fifth and last feature of Murdoch’s writing that I find incredibly appealing is her willingness to be unconventional without (supposedly) any shame. She is unconventional in her philosophical interests, her writing; but also in life, being queer in her identity and not following the conventional rules of her time for social interactions and relationships.

In this dissertation I will ‘take Iris different places’, which is the subtitle of this work. A more direct and dry approach would have been to pick as a subtitle ‘new Murdochian perspectives’ (see the introductory chapter). I imagine this dissertation as a sort of strolling through the contemporary philosophical landscape, just me and Iris, taking her to places she has never seen before. During this walk I show her some possibilities to apply her thought, some new perspectives, perhaps hoping to, in her own words, ‘deepen her concepts’. Of course I will never know whether she would appreciate the walk, the places I take her to, or whether she agrees with how I interpretate the path that she showed me first.

Thinking of Murdoch as a real person in this way, instead of ‘just another philosopher to position my arguments against’ is important to me. It gives context to philosophical questions, taking lived realities into account. Acknowledging these lived realities is a core theme of this dissertation. In 2016, *Living on Paper: Letters from Iris Murdoch, 1934–1995*, was published; a major collection of Murdoch’s interesting personal letters. Browning writes that they “[...] reveal a person, who by her own lights, is trying to get things right” (2018, p. 5). Katrien Schaubroeck writes in the afterword to the Dutch translation of *The Sovereignty of Good* about the possibility of Murdoch being “[...] an authentic thinker who kept life and thought close and mutually constituted” (2021, p. 140, my translation). I do not only think Schaubroeck is right; I think we should all aspire to be such philosophers.

INTRODUCTION:

New Murdochian Perspectives



Aim and overview

This dissertation consists of five published papers. The papers are about a wide range of topics; from moral duties to care ethics and from biomedical enhancements to cancel culture. They are written over a span of six years and published in different outlets. The papers are included in the following order:

1. The Possibility of a Duty to Love [DL1]
2. ‘Love’ as a Practice: Looking at Real People [LP2]
3. Taking the Love Pill: A Reply to Naar and Nyholm [TP3]
4. The Non-Individualistic and Social Dimension of Love Drugs [LD4]
5. The Moral Implications of Cancel Culture [CC5]

This is not a chronological order. Instead, the papers are divided in two groups: while papers 1 and 2 concern mostly theory (e.g. critiquing existing theories and offering new Murdochian perspectives), papers 3, 4 and 5 function as case studies and applications of what is argued for in the first two papers and the arguments made in this introductory chapter. After this introduction, the five papers follow in their entirety. They are intended to be read separately. Consequently parts of them will overlap, e.g. when explaining recurring philosophical ideas or standpoints. Since the works consulted for this dissertation overlap between papers, there is one bibliography added for the entire dissertation, instead of a bibliography per chapter. The different lay out and reference styles of the published papers have been adjusted to make a unifying whole. Other than that the papers are exactly the same as their published counterparts.

Despite the wide range of topics of the papers, love and morality are important concepts in all of them. However, just grouping these five papers would not necessarily show a coherent argument or dissertation. For someone who is not familiar with Murdoch’s philosophy, it would not even be clear that all papers are influenced by Murdochian thought. This introductory chapter serves as an overarching argument of the dissertation, showing how the papers are linked to one another.

In this introduction I will elaborate on Murdoch’s work as a philosopher, explain the ideas that are used in the five papers. Are her views relevant for contemporary debates in analytic philosophy? Can her theory be extended with contemporary insights? Spoiler alert: the answer to both questions is yes! The aim of this dissertation is to show the relevance of Murdoch’s theory for contemporary debates. More specifically, to show the relevance of her thought for debates in analytic philosophy of love, discussions about ‘moral love’, feminist debates and philosophical thought aiming for social justice in general, and for more applied philosophical debates such as biomedical enhancement and cancel culture.

In the spirit of Murdochian thought, this does not solely concern theoretical debates. I want to offer new Murdochian perspectives for both academic discussions, and the more practical and everyday questions: how to become better human beings? Or as I ask in one of the papers: how to become better lovers?

After providing context to Murdoch’s ideas, this introductory chapter will argue for the main claim of the dissertation.³ I will offer two new perspectives of Murdochian thought. First, I look at debates in contemporary analytical philosophy of love. I think that Murdoch’s conception of love has been overlooked within this domain. I argue that her thought could offer additional insights for the debate. This first new Murdochian perspective brings Murdoch into an existing contemporary debate.

The second offering of a new Murdochian perspective is not necessarily introducing Murdoch into existing debates, but adding a contemporary perspective to her original theory. I will take Murdoch’s theory from her individualistic approach, to a more social approach, focusing on socio-political structures. I will argue that Murdoch’s conception of love is relevant for contemporary fights for social justice.

The two distinctive ways in which I offer new Murdochian perspectives thus follow different methodologies in offering these perspectives. While the first perspective could be categorized as ‘philosophy of love debate + Murdoch’, the second could be categorized as ‘Murdoch + social justice’. In papers 2 and 4, I particularly focus on feminism. This is not to overlook

³ In this introductory chapter I have used material from my papers (other than the five included in this dissertation), public philosophy articles, essays and a book that were previously published. These are listed under ‘List of publications’, included after the bibliography.

INTRODUCTION

other fights for social justice, e.g. anti-racism or the labour movement. It is simply used as an example of how Murdochian thought can be relevant for contemporary fights for social justice. In this chapter I will add examples of ‘other’ struggles against oppression to enrich my argument. However, I think feminism (both as a term and a movement) cannot be separated from other anti-oppression movements (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 2000a; Lorde, 1982/2012). In this sense, with a few exceptions, ‘feminism’ in these papers can be read as ‘anti-oppression’.

In proposing these new Murdochian perspectives as the overarching argument, I will introduce the five papers and how they fit these perspectives.

Iris Murdoch in context

I will briefly introduce some of Murdoch’s original ideas. More specifically: those ideas that are important for this dissertation.

In opposition to the mainstream thought of her time, Murdoch believed that moral philosophy should contribute not just to abstract debates on the nature of morality (e.g. Ayer, 1936/1990 or Hare, 1952/1991), but to the practical question: *How can we become morally better?* For Murdoch, this is the central question of ethics. This dissertation is written with the same focus, zooming in on four of Murdoch’s original ideas:

1. The idea of love as an important moral concept, drawing on Simone Weil’s usage of the term.
2. An emphasis on the idea of moral perception, and the metaphor of seeing moral features of people and situations, and seeing what is to be done.
3. The dependence of moral thought upon conceptual scheme. “I can only choose within the world I can see” (IP, SOG, p. 37).
4. Regarding our moral efforts as “infinitely perfectible” (IP, SOG, p. 23).

In my offering of two new Murdochian perspectives I will not focus on meta-ethics, aesthetics, theology or the philosophers and schools of thought Murdoch positioned herself against. While these are all important aspects of Murdoch’s philosophy, and there is no doubt that these topics create fruitful and interesting philosophical discussions, I will leave those topics out for the most part. Those who are familiar with Murdoch’s ideas concerning these topics will recognize them here and there, as they are deeply engrained in her moral and practical philosophy, but they will not serve as the main topic of discussion.

Love

The most important Murdochian concept for this dissertation is *love*. Murdoch’s understanding of this concept is heavily influenced by the works

of Simone Weil (1950/2009; 1952/1997). Murdoch adopted many of Weil's ideas in her own philosophy when reviewing Weil's *Notebooks* (KV, 1956a, E&M, pp. 157-161), such as: Good is a transcendent reality; Good and Evil are connected with modes of human knowledge; the good person is one who knows or sees things as they are, in their moral and other aspects; progress in morality is a matter of 'meditation' rather than simply of action; when we direct our attention to the good, it excites love in us, though we recognize that we are ultimately incapable of attaining it; our ideal is to pay attention to the reality outside us 'to such a point that we no longer have the choice' of what to do (KV, 1956a, E&M, pp. 157-161).

To explain what these ideas of Weil mean to Murdoch, we must first look at Murdoch's picture of human beings. She argues against her contemporaries that their picture of human beings is flawed. Instead, she offers us her distinctive moral psychology, or as Broackes puts it: "what today might be called a theory of motivation and practical reasoning" (2012, p. 1-2). The term 'moral psychology' was historically used to refer to the study of moral development. In contrast, today the term 'moral psychology' refers to a much broader domain of study, containing various topics at the intersection of ethics, psychology and philosophy of mind, e.g. moral judgement, moral emotion, moral character or moral luck. Murdoch however, presents 'moral psychology' as a picture of the human being and how we can become morally better.

Murdoch presents a somewhat ruthless and pessimistic, but perhaps also realistic psychology, that acknowledges the prevalence of egoism. She sees the Freudian view of human beings as naturally selfish as "a realistic and detailed picture of the fallen man" (OGG, SOG, p. 51).⁴ "In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego", Murdoch writes (OGG, SOG, p. 51).

This picture of the human being follows from Murdoch's critiques for her contemporaries. In IP (SOG, pp. 1-44) Murdoch argues that will and reason are not wholly separate faculties: the human being is not a combination of an 'impersonal rational thinker' and a 'personal will', i.e. objective reason and subjective choice. Instead, we are "a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees" (IP, SOG, p. 39). She

⁴ I do not think that for Murdoch's theory to work we need to accept that human beings are naturally selfish. We need to accept that ego/selfishness is morality's enemy, but not necessarily that this is our 'natural' focus.

recognises how the self avoids unwelcome truths and projects fantasies onto the world around us. She recognizes how individuals can be ignorant of their own partiality. In OGG (SOG, pp. 45-74) she argues that the self is a place of illusion.

Are there techniques to purify and reorient this energy which is "naturally selfish" (SGC, SOG, p. 76)? Murdoch puts emphasis on our need to turn from *fantasy* to *reality*. Here, her Platonism comes to the surface: instead of thinking of the will as creator of value, we need to recognize the possibility of *vision* and *discovery* of a moral reality external to ourselves.

Besides Murdoch's moral psychology (her picture of the human being and how we can become morally better), Murdoch's *metaphysics of morals* is thus important to understand Murdochian concepts like love and perception. She argues for the reality of moral life and that goodness is a real, transcendent, aspect of the world. The answer to the question 'How can we become morally better', comes in "terms of an understanding of consciousness in relation to an external reality" (Altorf, 2008, p. 14). Or as Nora Hämäläinen and Gillian Dooley (2019) put it: "how our conceptions of 'the real' affect our moral orientation, and vice versa" (p. 6). Murdoch proposes a form of moral realism and combines this with a moral psychology: the moral life is about coming to have a proper vision of reality. Murdoch "believes in that reality, that it can be known by human persons, and that that reality [...] motivates us to act morally" (Blum, 2022).

What does Murdoch mean when she writes about 'reality'? Lawrence Blum (2022) helpfully categorizes three distinct strands in Murdoch's conception of moral reality: 1) other persons, 2) the Good and 3) metaphysics. When referring to reality in this dissertation, I am mostly referring to the first; other persons. 'Understanding the reality of other persons' is a core concept of this dissertation. While this strand is intertwined with the two other ways in which Murdoch views 'moral reality', I will leave those out of this dissertation for the most part, with the exception of shortly introducing the relation between 'Good' and 'Love' below.

As Blum (2022) notes, understanding reality as the reality of other persons means the individual reality of each other person, not 'other persons' as an aggregate. Blum clarifies this particular feature of Murdoch's theory as involving "an image of a struggle of each moral agent to grasp the

other person(s) in their particular world as distinct persons, as equally real as themselves" (Blum, 2022).

So how can we come to know (about) this reality? For Murdoch, *love* is the faculty that takes us to the real. She writes: "The love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really *looking*" (SGC, SOG, p. 89, italics in text). I will elaborate on this below (and more extensively in LP2). In combining love and truth in this way, Murdoch is unconventional: her linking of truth with love "goes against the grain of how we standardly use these terms" (Browning, 2018, p. 2) (I will elaborate more on this providing my argument and in DL1). Murdoch takes her conception of love almost directly from Simone Weil: "Love is the perception of individuals" and "Love [...] is the discovery of reality" (S&G, E&M, p. 215).

Goodness, then, is an exercise of love, paying loving attention to people and things. This is a matter of *obedience* to reality (IP, SOG, p. 41). Loving is to see things as they are, without self, in their moral and other complexity. Reality becomes "that which is revealed to the patient eye of love" (IP, SOG, p. 39). Murdoch writes: "'Good' : 'Real' : 'Love'. These words are closely connected." (IP, SOG, p. 41).

The Good is an object of attention, and this is one reason why it can do the job of turning us away from the egotistic self. A person who attends to things outside themselves, will attend less to the self within. Goodness is a matter of seeing the unself: to see and respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness. Love is *unselfing* (SGC, SOG, p. 82).

Murdoch also tells us that "the Good itself is not visible" (OGG, SOG, p. 68), we see other things "in its light" (p. 60), rather than seeing the Good directly. Goodness is transcendent, in being a matter of (1) going beyond our selves and (2) going beyond our incorrect or incomplete perceptions of other things (SGC, SOG, p. 91). The Good is an object of both knowledge and love for Murdoch, and she links those two notions: "to love, that is, to see" (OGG, SOG, p. 66); "attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love" (OGG, SOG, p. 67).

What does this exercise of love mean in practice? What does it mean to love on Murdoch's account? In OGG (SOG, pp. 45-74) Murdoch argues that the

freedom we need is 'freedom from fantasy' (to counteract the egotistical self), the ability realistically to see. Murdoch argues that morality is not a question of personal will but of *attentive study*. For Murdoch, love is loving *attention*. In KV, Murdoch repeats Weil's words: "We should pay attention to such a point that we no longer have the choice" (E&M, p. 159). In IP she writes:

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. There is also of course 'distorted vision,' and the word 'reality' here inevitably appears as a normative word [...] If we ignore the prior work of attention and notice only the emptiness of the moment of choice we are likely to identify freedom with the outward movement since there is nothing else to identify with. But if we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over. (IP, SOG, p. 37)

Murdoch defends Weil's view that, for the good agent, attending to a situation will make it clear what is the good thing to do, "without leaving any serious room for a 'choice' of other actions" (Broackes, 2012, p. 52). This might seem rather paradoxical: a situation presenting in a sense no choice should also be thought to be a situation of freedom (Broackes, 2012, p. 53). For Murdoch, obedience to reality is freedom.

She draws a parallel to the attention needed in learning new languages: she argues that we find the same virtues at work there as in morality (e.g. justice, truthfulness, humility, respect for a reality outside oneself). She writes:

Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality. Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal. The honesty and humility required of the student – not to pretend to know what one does not know – is the preparation for the honesty and humility of the scholar who does not even feel tempted to suppress the fact which damns his theory [...] Developing a Sprachgefühl [a sense for a language] is developing a judicious respectful sensibility to something which is very like another organism. (SGC, SOG, p. 87)

This resembles what Murdoch writes in ‘The Sublime and the Good’: “love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real” (E&M, p. 215).

Having discussed the concept ‘love’, we can now summarize Murdoch’s thought on this subject. Love, for Murdoch, is the antidote to egoism, which prevents us from seeing the world and therefore the good around us. Self-centeredness stands in the way of ‘doing the right thing’. The answer to the question ‘How can we become morally better?’ is to move *from fantasy to reality, through love*. To love is to ensure that the ego will not prevail.

This theory consists in two components: Murdoch’s metaphysics of morals (the reality of moral life and that goodness is a real, transcendent, aspect of the world) and her moral psychology (an account of how we creatures are able to know about, and be guided by, the transcendent good). For Murdoch, seeing truth and ‘doing good’ are related. We can look carefully, we can attend to people and their situations, and when we do so, we can come to know how things are in the moral realm, and to know what we ought to do.

This dissertation uses these concepts and connects them to contemporary philosophy, such as the philosophy of love debate, or combines these ideas with insights from feminist philosophy, critical theory and social epistemology.

Imperfection and progression

Another important Murdochian concept for this dissertation is perfection, or rather imperfection. Murdoch asks the following question: what is distinctive about moral concepts by contrast with those of science? What is at stake, she argues against her British peers, is the liberation of morality and philosophy as a study of human nature, from the domination of science (IP, SOG, p. 26). Morality is less to do with “the isolated will jumping in and out of an impersonal logical complex” (IP, SOG, p. 23), and more with the *progressive attempt* to see a particular object clearly.

This emphasis on progressive attempt is important. A person’s grasp of moral concepts typically deepens with experience (this idea is explored by Murdoch in IP, SOG). This deepening of our concepts happens with attending lovingly: *we learn by looking*. As Murdoch writes: “we have a different

image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty” (VCM, E&M, p. 322). Love is a practice of self-transcendence: Murdoch’s conception of loving attention is one of progression (IP, SOG, p. 23).

The ideal Good is beyond our grasp. Murdoch writes that “the Good itself is not visible” (OGG, SOG, p. 68), we see other things “in its light” (p. 60) rather than seeing the Good directly. The ideal is unattainable, therefore loving is an infinite task. Loving attention (and being good) is “infinitely perfectible” (IP, SOG, p. 23). Murdoch writes: “The moral life, on this view, is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrences of explicit moral choices” (IP, SOG, p. 37).

In her rejection of the picture of human beings that is painted by her contemporaries, Murdoch gives the famous example of a mother and a daughter-in-law:

A mother (M) feels hostility to her daughter-in-law (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 tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D’s accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him. [...] Time passes, and it could be that M settles down with a hardened sense of grievance and a fixed picture of D [...]. 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: ‘[...] 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. [...] the change is not in D’s behaviour 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. (IP, SOG, pp. 16-17, 17)

The change takes place in M’s mind and is not dependent on a change in D’s behaviour. We could imagine that D lives very far away, or is deceased even, but still this change in M could take place. The example is meant to show that what happens in the inner life is morally important. Murdoch’s contemporaries are mistaken to neglect the inner life. M&D is the story of a

change in *vision*. And out of it, Murdoch derives an ambitious replacement for the world view of her contemporaries. Her aim is to show us that ‘private’ moral thinking does matter.

Murdoch argues that moral tasks are characteristically endless, not only because, within a concept, “our efforts are imperfect, but also because as we move, and as we look our concepts themselves are changing (IP, SOG, p. 27). “M’s independence of science [...] rests not simply in her moving will but in her seeing knowing mind” (p. 27). Love as an infinite practice means that we can and have to adjust our concepts constantly to the reality outside us.

At the end of the example, M sees D as “spontaneous” and “delightfully youthful” (IP, SOG, p. 17). But the example might as well go on while M continues to look upon D with loving attention. It might be the case that M later alters her view of D from ‘spontaneous’ to ‘somewhat impulsive’, for example, after continuously looking at D without letting her own desires and needs play a part. This imaginative continuation of the example also shows that loving attention is not meant to be ‘judging everything as positive’; it is about ‘*obedience to reality* as an exercise of love’ (IP, SOG, p. 41, italics added), while knowing that we could never fully grasp that reality. The truth of love is “not one thing but a dynamic relationship between kinds of attention and forms of feeling that embrace contrasting styles, including the sacred and the profane” (Browning, 2018, p. 2-3).

In VCM, Murdoch concludes against her contemporaries that if “moral differences are conceptual (in the sense of being differences of vision)” – what one can see depends in part on what concepts one has – then this “makes impossible the reduction of ethics to logic, since it suggests that morality must, to some extent at any rate, be studied historically” (E&M, p. 84). With this emphasis on moral differences and conceptual scheme, Murdoch emphasizes that love and morality are about a progressive attempt. Murdoch writes that 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 scientific one” (IP, SOG, p. 23).

Unfortunately, Murdoch does not give us a clear explanation of what ‘progress’ means on her account. She is often elusive about important concepts which leads to secondary literature using these concepts in a

divergent manner. In this dissertation I take the following Murdochian ideas to be central, without giving a precise definition of what ‘progress’ means: love is characterized as a movement of moral progress: a self-transcendent practice of not getting stuck with individualistic desires, needs and fantasies of the ego (SOG).

Contemporary Murdochian thought

Contemporary Murdochian scholarship focuses mainly on the *explanation* of Murdoch’s philosophical ideas (e.g. Broackes, 2012; Browning, 2018; Hämäläinen and Dooley, 2019) or, less philosophically, *portraying her life* (zooming in on her novel writing, her Alzheimer’s disease or her unconventional love life; e.g. Conradi, 2001). On top of that there is of course much scholarly attention for Murdoch in literary studies, focusing on her literary contributions. Although *studying* the details of her philosophical work, her life and her novels are without a doubt very interesting, there are other questions to be asked.

Would it not be interesting to *use* Murdochian thought for contemporary purposes? Would it not be interesting to look at the relevance of Murdoch’s ideas for contemporary theories and contemporary practical questions? Murdoch’s rich philosophy deserves recognition beyond spelling out her ideas in detail. It could serve as an inspiration for original contemporary ideas and fuel new thought. The aim of this dissertation, and the five papers included, is exactly that.

My argument is twofold. First, I bring into contemporary analytical philosophy of love Murdoch’s original conception of love (philosophy of love debate + Murdoch). In the philosophy of love debate, there are few philosophers who mention Murdoch, but there are some. In the famous 1999 article ‘Love as a moral emotion’ David Velleman develops a moral view of love inspired by Murdoch (which I will critically examine in LP2). In ‘Love and the Value of a Life’ (2014), Kieran Setiya is influenced by Murdoch developing a love-based ethics to critique utilitarianism. In offering my first new Murdochian perspective, I will critique both Velleman’s and Setiya’s perspective, and argue that my Murdochian perspective has some

advantages over them.⁵

Second, I will add a more political and feminist stance to Murdoch's ideas about love and morality (Murdoch + social justice) focusing mainly on feminism in the papers and on race in this introductory chapter. I think there is something to be added to the scholarship of the few philosophers who *do* ask questions about what Murdochian ideas could mean today. For example, Sabina Lovibond (2011) and Lawrence Blum (2012, 2022) critique Murdoch for respectively patriarchal ideas or not engaging with socio-political issues. Lovibond and Blum both formulate a rather negative answer to the question: what could Murdochian ideas mean today? In contrast, I want to formulate a positive answer to that question. In Murdochian scholarship there is doubt that we can interpret and use Murdochian ideas in a way that is feminist or aims at social justice. In offering the second new Murdochian perspective, I want to relieve us from that doubt, and argue that Murdoch's conception of love is relevant for contemporary fights for social justice.

There are a few philosophers who have hinted at this before, such as Bridget Clarke (2012), Hilde L. Nelson (1992) and Nora Hämäläinen (2015). While Hämäläinen, Nelson and Clarke have all recognized feminist potential in Murdoch's views, this potential needs to be spelled out in more detail, embedded in other theories (e.g. critical theory, epistemology), connected with other struggles than the struggle against patriarchy (e.g. race) and spelled out in not just abstract theory but providing a tentative practical explanation of this potential, showing that Murdoch's ideas are relevant for the more practical and everyday questions we have today. I will take up this task in offering the second new Murdochian perspective.

Nelson's reassessment of Murdoch is sharp and helpful, but taking nurse ethics as her main subject it is too narrow for general claims about fighting for social justice. In her critical assessment of Lovibond's accusations (2015), Hämäläinen offers a helpful and detailed assessment of why Lovibond is too harsh in criticizing Murdoch for her 1) ethics of obedience, and 2) in her rejection of structuralism and poststructuralist interrogations of collective consciousness, but particularly this last point remains somewhat abstract. It focuses on what Murdoch does not do – which makes sense arguing

⁵ There are other contemporary philosophers of love that are influenced by Murdoch, whom are not included in this dissertation, such as Troy Jollimore, who incorporates Murdoch's emphasis on perception in his book *Love's Vision* (2011).

against Lovibond's accusations – while remaining somewhat unclear about how we can use Murdoch's theory as a feminist companion. Nevertheless, Hämäläinen's set up is incredibly useful to take the next step, as are Nelson's and Clarke's sharp observations. I want to take their assessment of Murdochian ideas further, as I believe there is a bigger project here.

What has so far been overlooked is the promise of Murdochian loving attention as a revolutionary companion. For example, what is not mentioned by Clarke, Hämäläinen or Nelson is that looking at others or the world outside ourselves has a profound effect on our view of ourselves and that this specifically is an ally to a feminist agenda. Clarke comes close to such a claim when arguing that “perception of social structure [is] an implicit part of Murdochian attention” (2012, p. 251), but the revolutionary potential of this needs to be spelled out in more detail.

Political?

Before I present my argument, it is helpful to ask a few questions about Murdoch's stance on political matters. Why is it that Murdochian scholarship doubts whether we can interpret or use Murdochian ideas in a feminist or political manner? In these last two sections of providing context for this dissertation, I will address this doubt, focusing on politics in general in this section before zooming in on feminism in the next. After having provided this context, I will present my argument in the form of the two new Murdochian perspectives, and will show that we *can* use Murdochian ideas in a political and more specifically feminist manner.

As others have noted (e.g. Blum, 2012; Hämäläinen, 2015; Lovibond, 2011; Nelson, 1992), Murdoch is not too keen on taking up a political stance in her moral philosophy. For example, Blum criticizes Murdoch for focusing on “individual psychology”, “with very little appreciation of the social and cultural forms of the distorting images that block an appreciation of [...] other human beings” (2012, p. 317). Still Murdoch's political life is not non-existent, and perhaps we can make a distinction between the political engagement in the early Murdoch and the lack of (and even aversion against) political engagement in her later moral philosophy.

In 1938, while a student at Oxford, Murdoch joined the Communist Party of Great Britain. She left the party in 1942, but remained sympathetic to communism for several years. While Murdoch's philosophical work shows little of these political views, we can recognize some of it in two particular articles: 'Vision and Choice in Morality' (1956b) and the recognizably socialist essay 'A House of Theory' (1958). In VCM (E&M, pp. 76-98) she presents Liberalism as a questionable moral or political stance, "embedded in the supposedly 'neutral' views of her peers" (Broackes, 2012, p. 29). Her peers' picture of the 'logic' of morality is conveniently the logic of those moral systems that fit their own 'liberal atheist' or 'protestant Christian' traditions. These pictures exclude the ideas of those who think against a transcendental background, like that of "the Marxist" or "certain kinds of Christian" (VCM, E&M, p. 96). By contrast, Murdoch argues: "For the purposes of analysis moral philosophy should remain at the level of the differences" (VCM, E&M, p. 97).

The outspoken political essay HT (E&M, pp. 171-186) was published in a volume of essays replying to the question 'What is wrong with the British Left – and what should be done about it?'. The paper asks questions about 'the good life' on a societal level, and how the Welfare State has not secured it (HT, E&M, p. 183). What I find most interesting is that half of the paper is a history of the 'impoverishment of philosophy'. Murdoch argues that philosophy has focused too much on studying the logic of moral and political statements, *and thereby unfortunately has removed itself from important moral and political issues.*

The other half of the paper is about how the socialist movement should return to the problem of labour. Today we can recognize this in political (feminist) philosophers like Nancy Fraser, who, in answering the question 'What is wrong with the Left and what should we do about it?', argues that, as a broader movement, the left should view anti-racism and feminism as labour movements (2022). Murdoch's paper was much reprinted and very influential: civil rights activist Tom Hayden drew on Murdoch's essay for some of the leading ideas of what became the famous Port Huron statement in 1962 (Broackes, 2012), a manifesto that was defining for the movement, framing the issues of the anti-war movement and giving an impulse to the broader social movement of the 1960s and early 1970s (Students for a Democratic Society, 1962).

Murdoch clearly was aware of politics and social struggles and was not afraid to take a political stance in her personal life. In the articles mentioned above she argues that, for her, the dominant thought of her time is an 'impoverishment of philosophy', focusing too much on 'neutrality' and 'logic', and hereby removing itself from important moral and political issues. This indicates that she thinks that moral philosophy should focus on political issues. However, this does not come through in her overall philosophy, as Murdochian scholarship notices, of which the vast majority of works was written after she wrote VCM and HT.

And it is not only *lack* of engagement with politics in her moral philosophy that leads to doubt in Murdochian scholarship whether we can interpret or use her philosophical ideas in a political way. In contrast with her early writings (such as VCM and HT), Murdoch substantially changes her view in the later MGM, being explicitly averse to political engagement in moral philosophy. In 'Morals and Politics', the twelfth chapter of MGM, Murdoch specifically argues for "a distinction between morals and politics" (p. 355). She furthermore adheres to liberalism (cf. VCM) and argues for a private-public dichotomy: "in family life it may be better to concentrate on one's duties and leave the question of one's rights to be taken up by others" (MGM, p. 355). This private-public dichotomy has been heavily criticized by feminists, for keeping women – who historically have been restricted to the private domain – out of politics (e.g. Okin, 1989). This dichotomy is specifically what inspired the feminist slogan 'the personal is political'.

We thus see opposing views in Murdoch's writing: in 1958 she writes about the impoverishment of philosophy – the removal of philosophy from important moral and political issues – while in 1992 she writes that morals and politics should be separated. These contrasting views are written in the very first and the very last years of her philosophical career, with a lot of works written between these two contrasting periods. Thus, interpreting or using Murdochian ideas in a socio-political way is complex.

I do not agree with Murdoch's later statements about the separation of morals and politics. I will elaborate on this below when arguing for the second new Murdochian perspective (in the section 'From individual to social'). In this dissertation I follow Murdoch's early path. Somewhere between her early political essays and the later MGM, Murdoch and I part ways.

Feminist?

Murdoch was one of the first women to pursue a career in a discipline that previously had been the prerogative of a privileged group of men. In 1978 she took part in an interview series called ‘Men of Ideas’ after the gender of all the other participants. HT was published in a collection of essays by a dozen ‘Thoughtful Young Men’ as the cover put it. Murdoch on this cover is named last, closing the ranks after eleven men. In *The Art of Imaging* Altorf writes:

Does it matter that Murdoch was a woman? No interviewer ever asked Murdoch about women and philosophy, but it seems unlikely that she would judge that relationship to be any different from the relationship between men and philosophy. [...] Philosophy has often been defined as a quest for universal truth. Such a quest, it is assumed, cannot start from a gendered position. By emphasizing their gender women risk locking themselves out of the library. (2008, p. 114)

Altorf is referring to a passage of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1862/1984) in which Woolf describes how women cannot enter the library without being accompanied by a man or permission letter.

It is important to stress that Murdoch herself was not a great feminist ally. Similar to Blum’s criticism in the previous section, Murdoch leaves women’s liberation out of her writing. Murdoch resented focus on her gender and did not want to be singled out as a female writer, rather than a writer (Altorf, 2008). Altorf writes that she resented “questions about her preference for male narrators, about her unwillingness to consider women’s issues, or about the fact that none of the women in her fiction have her strengths” (Altorf, 2008, p. 20). The point of liberation for Murdoch is to be people, just people like everybody else (Dooley, 2003, p. 83). Similar to the conclusions in the previous section; interpreting as or using Murdochian ideas for feminism is thus controversial.

Yet, Altorf points out, interviews demonstrate Murdoch’s “awareness of persistent sexual inequality” (2008, p. 20), arguing that women’s emancipation is only starting, that it’s still a man’s world and that “a man doesn’t have to explain what it’s like to be a man but a woman has to explain what it’s like to

be a woman” (Dooley, p. 207). Altorf (2008) argues that Murdoch endorses feminism that seeks social and political reform, by repeatedly stressing education as a tool. Margaret Moan Rowe writes:

Murdoch asserts that men and women are the same... Then she goes on to suggest there is a great difference: somehow men are already there. Their presence defines the human race. Women have to join the human race and a principal route to that connection is education. (2004, p. 80)

Again, Murdoch seems to be aware of the political reality, but “she keeps this form of women’s liberation strictly separate from the world of literature and philosophy” (Altorf, 2008, p. 21), which are, to Murdoch, in a realm where “gender does not play a part” (p. 21). As Murdoch puts it: “I think I want to write about things on the whole where it does not matter whether you’re male or female, in which case you better be male, because a male represents ordinary human beings, unfortunately, as things stand at the moment, whereas a woman is always a woman!” (Murdoch in Dooley, 2003, p. 82). This quote shows that Murdoch understands the mechanism of the male view accepted as the ‘neutral’ view and that representing a woman is regarded as being subjective. She seems to grasp a reality that is much later defined by social epistemologists. Below I will discuss similarities between Murdoch’s ideas and social epistemology in the section ‘Epistemology’.

Murdoch’s public statements are very cool towards the idea of a female ‘viewpoint’, and leave us in no doubt of her contempt for “rubbish like ‘women’s studies’ or ‘black studies’” (Lovibond, 2011, p. 4). From a contemporary feminist perspective, such statements do not favour our view of Murdoch. With such statements she seems to participate in and reinforce the rules of the patriarchy and of white domination.

However, without justifying these statements, we can think of an explanation, acknowledging the social environment Murdoch had to deal with in order to be taken seriously as a writer and philosopher. Lovibond suggests that Murdoch’s aversion to singling out women’s problems could be the aftermath of a certain diplomatic caution that may have prevailed in Murdoch’s lifetime (2011). Altorf (2008) notes that her objections were directed against being singled out for being a woman. She objected to being

singled out as a means of exclusion. Now that theories of differences and subjectivity are becoming more mainstream (e.g. theories of intersectionality or standpoint epistemology), Murdoch might have judged singling out for being a woman differently – but we will, of course, never know. I think Murdoch's statements about separating women's liberation from philosophy stand in stark contrast with her own conception of moral philosophy (I will elaborate on this when presenting my new Murdochian perspectives, in the section 'From individual to social'). Murdoch specifically puts emphasis on the importance of difference, on history, on conceptual schemes. Was Murdoch simply born too early to engage in these debates? Or is her later liberalism (MGM, pp. 348-391) surfacing in these statements?

Besides Murdoch's statements about women's liberation, there are, on a more theoretical level, Murdochian concepts that feminists take issue with. Lovibond (2011) for example, criticizes Murdoch's moral philosophy for perpetuating patriarchal ideas. Particularly the concept of 'unselfing' raises feminist concerns. The worry is that this concept fits an ideology of female subordination (Lovibond, 2011) which has led some philosophers to label Murdoch's views as misogynist (Lovibond, 2011; Manne, 2017, 31-32; Nelson, 1992). Murdoch's answer to 'how we become morally better' would supposedly (whether she intends to or not) reinforce the oppression of women, by asking self-effacing practices of them. I will discuss and answer this feminist worry for Murdochian philosophy below, in the section 'Worries about unselfing'.

In her philosophical work there is little proof of Murdoch striving for emancipation. However, the novels are regarded differently. Murdoch is famous for the plentiful and humane representation of lesbian and gay characters in her novels. Her unconventionality and courage show in describing a married gay couple in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, published in 1970, just three years after the decriminalization of private homosexual acts in the United Kingdom.⁶

⁶ Something must be said about Murdoch's queer identity. In this dissertation I speak of Murdoch as a woman. However, in her personal letters she is pondering her fluidity of gender and sexuality (2016). In a playful poem to Brigid Brophy, one of her lovers, she writes:

[...]
It's quite confusing.
You want me female, then you want me male,
Or else hermaphrodite, to suit your choosing.

When looking at Murdoch's statements about women's or Black liberation we must remember that Murdoch lived in a very different time and place. This is not to say we should justify such statements, but I think we can look at her persona in a broader light than singling out her somewhat oppressive statements. (Interestingly Murdoch herself writes: "We 'forgive' people in the remoter past because we can (we think) see more clearly the limitations of their situation, [...]", MGM, p. 389).

Even if the accusations are legitimate, it does not mean that we have to refute all of her ideas. Progression does not benefit from 'throwing it all in the trash', but demands looking critically at the particular ideas. In Murdochian spirit, it demands deepening our concepts, not choosing supposedly perfected ones. For Murdoch's ideas, too, we could pick up the recycle bins, and categorize which ideas we want to propel forward and dispose of the ideas we no longer value. What matters most is how we transform or use the brilliant ones.

While Murdoch does not make the step to an explicit political or feminist theory, she paves the way for someone else to do so. Below I take this next step in offering two new Murdochian perspectives.

[...]
To understand this stuff I simply fail,
Eschewing Freud and all his patter, for I
Don't make of sex a basic category
[...] (2016, p. 206)

In this dissertation I speak of Murdoch as a woman, mainly because she was regarded and socialized as one and I think this has influenced how both she and her work have been regarded. I do however want to respect her queer identity by shortly mentioning this interesting personal fact. Perhaps today she would have identified herself as gender non-conforming or non-binary. Perhaps not wanting to be singled out as a women had more reasons than not wanting to be excluded (cf. Altorf, 2008).

A new Murdochian perspective: philosophy of love

The first new Murdochian perspective I want to offer is to bring Murdoch into the contemporary philosophy of love debate. I suggest that Murdoch's conception of love has been overlooked within this domain and her thought could offer additional insights about love and morality. The new Murdochian perspective I am offering here is mainly a negative one: a critique on the existing debate, showing that there are gaps, referencing to Murdoch's conceptions about love and morality. In contrast, the section, 'A new Murdochian perspective: social justice', will offer a positive one, offering a Murdochian account of love.

Love versus morality

Contemporary analytic philosophers hold opposing views to what Murdoch has written about love and morality. To combine 'love' with 'morality' seems to be an unpopular position: many philosophers argue love and morality to be at odds. This provides a gap in the contemporary debate, that could be filled with Murdochian thought. As we have seen, for Murdoch, loving is moral. She offers a stark contrast with what seems to be the consensus in contemporary analytic debate on love and morality.

The aim of this section corresponds with the first paper included in this dissertation. In 'The Possibility of a Duty to Love' [DL1], I investigate the contemporary debate by looking at objections to a moral obligation to love. I wrote the paper when investigating whether we can make sense of an argument for 'a moral call for love'. In contrast to the dominant thought, I was looking for a view that argued for a more important role for love in contemporary moral philosophy. Contemporary debates talk about such a moral call in terms of 'duty' and 'obligation', therefore the paper takes this as the main topic.⁷ Since Murdoch is not part of this contemporary debate,

⁷ I am aware that there are technical differences between the concepts of 'duty' and 'obligation', however these differences are irrelevant for this dissertation. In the paper I use 'duty' and 'obligation' somewhat interchangeably, since I adopt the relevant word usage of major sources

I was not very familiar with her conceptions of love and morality, yet.

The paper examines four objections to the idea that we have a moral obligation to love. Reviewing these objections, I find that something is missing from the contemporary analytic debate about love and morality. The specific conceptions of love and morality that it presupposes, make it difficult to argue for a more important role for love in moral philosophy. However, on other conceptions of love and morality, a more important role may be more plausible. The paper concludes with arguing that all objections against a duty to love can be rejected by looking at different conceptions of obligations and different conceptions of love. Would the contemporary philosophy of love debate include other conceptions of love and morality, different conclusions are possible. I was looking for a view that argued that loving is the moral thing to do and could not find this in the contemporary debate. Consequently, I arrived at Murdoch.

In DL1 I will give a more extensive overview of the contemporary debate by focusing on four discussions about love and morality. Here I will illustrate the argument by zooming in on one particular discussion, and summarizing two other discussions. I aim to show that contemporary claims are all founded on conceptions of love and morality that differ from Murdoch's. Murdochian conceptions of love and morality consequently could fill some gaps in the debate.

The supposed tension between love and morality is argued for in multiple ways. First, there is the incompatibility between *motivations* of love and morality. Williams (1981) gives us the famous example of the drowning wife. Williams argues that worrying about moral deliberation when your wife is drowning seems inappropriate. We would hope that the motivating thought to save the wife is a loving motivation – 'that is my wife' – instead of impersonal justification. Michael Stocker (1977) similarly argues that motivations of love and duty are not compatible, by giving us an example of a friend visiting in the hospital. Imagine a friend visiting us in the hospital replying to our expression of gratitude with the statement 'it is nothing, I just did my duty'. To the extent in which he literally means this, he becomes a worse friend,

in the debate, such as Matthew Liao, Stephen Darwall, Harry Frankfurt, and Immanuel Kant. In this introductory chapter I simply adopt the same usage as in the paper.

argues Stocker. We want his motivation to be that he visits us because of his love for us, not because he regards it his duty. Both examples and Williams' and Stocker's conclusions have been discussed by many contemporaries. Some argue that there is nothing wrong with a husband who worries about moral justifications or a friend who is motivated by moral concern (Sadler 2006). But the consensus seems to be that somehow love and morality are in tension.

If one had a duty to love, it follows that one could fulfil this duty by loving someone out of duty. Yet, loving a person out of duty rather than for the person's own sake, does not seem equivalent to really loving a person. Following this line of thought, duty has no place in love, and love has no place in the world of moral obligations. This objection is rooted in criticism of Kant's moral theory. Kant argues that an action has moral worth only if it is done for the sake of duty (1797/2017). Critics of Kant argue that at least in personal relationships, we should act out of a direct concern for others, but a Kantian agent cannot do this, because he is acting out of a concern for a moral principle.

What would Murdoch say about the drowning wife or the visiting friend? Murdoch criticizes the Kantian perspective of morality for being too abstract (S&G, MGM). Morality is not impersonal. Murdoch argues that the route to become a morally better person is precisely via the particular (SOG). Murdoch argues that loving is what makes us morally better people (SOG). She places love at the centre of morality and considers love a virtue (SOG). In her view of love and morality there is no incompatibility between claiming that one's motivation for doing 'x' was love, or claiming that one's motivation for 'x' was moral insight. In this sense Murdoch argues that love is constitutive of being a good person. To act lovingly *is* to act morally. These are not separate motivations. Instead, the Good and love are closely connected (IP, SOG, p. 41).

It is interesting to speculate about what Murdoch would have written in response to Williams' and Stocker's examples. Maybe it would go something like this: a friend who is visiting you in the hospital is motivated by both love *and* morality. His loving attention to your particular needs might have deepened his concept of what it is to be a friend, and what is the right thing for him to do.

What about the drowning wife? Williams takes issue with impartial deliberation, when we should act from loving motivation. But here, too, love and morality do not need to be in tension, as for Murdoch, saving one's wife can be a loving *and* moral act. Murdoch would perhaps argue that the entire example is based on a picture of morality that is flawed: if one understands the example to show a tension between love and morality, one takes 'morality' to be 'impartial deliberations', while for Murdoch morality can be a partial endeavour. Murdoch and Williams agree about a certain picture of human beings being unable to make 'cold', abstract, objective deliberations. Murdoch argues that this is a fantasy about the human mind (IP, SOG).

Murdoch's version of ethics differs from the views of ethics that are discussed in DL1. Most of these views are talking about moral calls in terms of impartial principles. It is therefore difficult to bring Murdoch into a debate about 'obligations/duties to love'. Murdoch does talk about duties, but not when it comes to a moral call for love. For her, loving is a virtue. Above I have explained some of Murdoch's ideas. It might be helpful to add something here about Murdoch's view of ethics.

Murdoch's view of moral philosophy is complex. Her view is a "patchwork of partly disconnected, complementary vocabularies and perspectives, each with its own role and dignity" (Hämäläinen, 2015, p. 747). Murdoch writes: "Philosophers have sought for a single principle upon which morality may be seen to depend. I do not think that moral life can be in this sense reduced to a unity" (MGM, p. 429). In MGM, Murdoch lists four categories: "axioms," "duties", "eros," and "void". Axioms have to do with "abstract principles to guide political life (life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness)" (Hämäläinen, 2015, p. 748). Duties comprise the Kantian realm of what we owe to one another, "concerned primarily with the judicial and extrovert aspects of morality" (2015, p. 748). Eros and void are the more introvert aspects of morality. Hämäläinen rightly points out that this quadripartite summary should be read as Murdoch's reminder that we should not reduce our understanding of morality to any of its components (2015, p. 748). Murdoch moves between the inner drive of moral life and external axioms and duties. For Murdoch, morality is complex. Murdoch does not talk about duties or obligations to love, since duties are more concerned with the extrovert

INTRODUCTION

aspects of morality. For Murdoch, love or loving attention is a more introvert aspect of morality and therefore considered a virtue.

Above I have showed that a Murdochian perspective could give original responses in contemporary debates about love and morality. I want to shortly mention two other contemporary discussions, and how a Murdochian view could offer a new perspective in these debates.

A common view in contemporary philosophy of love is that we are not able to control love, since love is regarded as an emotion and emotions are regarded as uncontrollable (in DL1 I will give a more extensive overview of this discussion). Murdoch's example of M and D might serve as an example that love is not uncontrollable (Liao, 2015). M decides to reflect on the reasons why she feels contempt for D, and realizes that her reason is that she is jealous that D will threaten M's relationship with her son. After critical self-reflection, she decides that her feelings of contempt for D are not supported by good reasons. Through reflecting on the reasons why she feels a certain way toward D and deciding that her emotions are not well-supported, M makes way for developing affection for D. In this sense, Murdoch views love more as a practice, instead of an uncontrollable emotion. While the contemporary debate uses conceptions of love that are restricted to a certain outcome, other conceptions of love – like Murdoch's – could widen the debate and possibly lead to different conclusions.

Another discussion in contemporary analytic philosophy of love is about reasons, more specifically, whether love is responsive to reasons. Harry Frankfurt famously argues it is not (2009), others argue that this seems counterintuitive. Why do we feel we have reasons to love the particular person we love? Why do some loves strike us as appropriate and some inappropriate? (Kolodny, 2003; Shpall, 2020; Stump, 2006; Velleman, 1999). What this debate seems to ignore is that we could not only have a reason to love person X, we could independently have a reason to love – period. Focusing on why we love and what love is in general, enables us to look at what we find meaningful in love and loving, instead of what we find valuable in the beloved. Iris Murdoch shows us that we can think of love as a virtue: a loving person is more virtuous than an indifferent person. The answer to why we should love, is that it makes us better human beings.

A NEW MURDOCHIAN PERSPECTIVE: PHILOSOPHY OF LOVE

In this short overview of discussions in the contemporary debate, I want to show that these discussions are limited in their conceptions of love and morality. The debate is missing out on possibilities to connect love with morality. This gap in the debate poses a technical problem regarding argumentation: with these conceptions we cannot argue for a more important role for love in moral philosophy. One could simply say it would be a shame not to include Murdoch's interesting perspective in the field that is contemporary analytic philosophy of love. But this gap poses other problems, too. For example, focusing on 'reasons to love X' ignores that we could independently have a reason to love (period). If we open the contemporary debate up to conceptions of love that are (at least) compatible with morality, we could have discussions about how loving makes us better human beings. This does not need to be limited to merely a theoretical argument, but it could also offer a prescription of tangible practices for our daily life. Below I will take up such a task, but first, I want to focus on another gap in the contemporary debate, in contemporary accounts that *do* argue for a moral kind of love.

Moral love, but different

While the contemporary debate focuses on love and morality being at odds, there are a few philosophers, who, like Murdoch, argue that love and morality are not segregated perspectives, rather the two perspectives converge. This position is argued for by Kieran Setiya (2014) and David Velleman (1999). I critique these contemporary perspectives, and argue that a Murdochian perspective has some advantages over them.

Looking at contemporary social and political challenges with a social justice lens, we can ask ourselves: What do we want love to mean? We might wonder what the concept itself implies. We might wonder whether we can improve the way we use the concept. Can we choose a conception of love that suits us better? Is more inclusive? Makes us better lovers or better human beings, from a feminist or social justice perspective?

In "Love' as a Practice: Looking at Real People' [LP2] I pursue an *ameliorative* project. Sally Haslanger (2000, 2006), has distinguished between descriptive projects and ameliorative projects in philosophy. Philosophers engaged in a descriptive project aim to reveal the *operative* concept: the objective type

that our usage of a certain term tracks (if any). Philosophers engaged in an ameliorative project aim to reveal the *target* concept: the concept that we should be using. In an ameliorative project we can ask: what is the point of having this concept? Which concept would serve these purposes best?

Haslanger (2000) does this for the concepts ‘gender’ and ‘race’. Her analyses of these concepts are not intended to capture our ordinary concepts of gender and race, but her aim is to figure out the target concepts. She furthermore argues that the point of having the concepts ‘gender’ and ‘race’ is achieving social justice. The ameliorative analysis of these particular concepts thus consists in understanding ‘gender’ and ‘race’ in a manner that would be most useful in order to achieve social justice.

In LP2 I suggest we do the same for the concept ‘love’. The ameliorative project requires actively making decisions about what to mean when using ‘love’. What is the point of having the concept ‘love’? Unfortunately for my purposes here, ‘love’ is a much broader concept than a concept like ‘gender’ or ‘race’. There may be many different points of having the concept ‘love’, since the term can refer to different types of love. For example, parental love and romantic love can co-exist as terms – in a way two different conceptions of ‘gender’ cannot – since they refer to two different phenomena. It is therefore difficult to indicate or argue for *the* point of the concept ‘love’.

For the project here, I follow Haslanger and view the concept ‘love’ (like ‘gender’ and ‘race’) as a useful concept for social justice. I do not want to claim that this is the only point of having the term ‘love’, but I want to consider the term in this light. Doing so provides interesting views on both academic debates and discussions in the public domain, as I will show below. Viewing ‘love’ in the light of social justice, we can ask what conceptions of love are suitable for such a project. I argue that Velleman’s and Setiya’s concept of ‘love’ do not suffice. Instead, I propose that a Murdochian kind of love that views love as an active practice of looking at particular others, benefits the social justice aim.

It must however be said that Velleman and Setiya might disagree with ‘social justice’ being the point of having the term ‘love’. Furthermore, both Velleman’s and Setiya’s accounts of love are descriptive, not ameliorative, so our philosophical projects differ. However, even of descriptive projects we can ask what they contribute to the concept in the real world. Murdoch herself already notes that how we view the world has moral consequences.

Descriptive projects, too, are a way of attending to things and situations and thereby contribute to how we view and understand the world. For Murdoch, philosophy is necessarily involved in both a descriptive and a normative project: “It does not only describe what is: through its choices of words and emphases, it makes positive suggestions as to how we could or perhaps should see things” (Hämäläinen and Dooley, 2019, p. 8). While Velleman and Setiya are not engaged in a similar project, we can still ask what their descriptive views have to offer when considering the concept ‘love’ in the light of this ameliorative project.

In LP2 I consider the love story of Dante and Beatrice (famous for being Dante’s muse) to critique Velleman’s view. Dante was helplessly in love with Beatrice, but during his life they only met a few times; and only twice they had the shortest conversation of greeting each other (Alighieri, 1294/1993). His deep love for Beatrice became his reason to write poetry. More crucially, it became his reason to be alive. In Dante’s poems Beatrice appears before him as a ghostly shadow, a half-goddess. She functions as a muse, watches over him and guides him, gives him helpful instructions, or criticizes him. While Beatrice is enormously valuable to Dante, his ideas of her merely consist in projection, prompted by his own desires and feelings. He is ignorant of the real Beatrice, while focusing on his fantasy of her. Could love not be more valuable – especially if we were Beatrice – than Dante’s fantasy?

What do we want love to mean? What is the point of having the concept ‘love’? In LP2 I argue that we don’t want love to mean: a relationship based on unrealistic fantasies, or these fantasies being the core of the relationship. This is not what we would consider a valuable, meaningful kind of love for both (or more) people involved. I suggest that Dante loves ‘the fantasy Beatrice’, he does not love Beatrice. For the real Beatrice, Dante is not a great lover, at all.

I furthermore suggest that Velleman’s and Setiya’s conceptions of ‘love’ lead to *egocentric-fantasies-love*, while Murdoch’s conception is working towards *seeing-the-real-other-love*. In the paper I give an extensive overview of Velleman’s account. Here I will add Setiya’s view as an additional argument. I critique both Velleman and Setiya on two points: they view love as *passive*, and as *perfected*.

Both Velleman and Setiya are influenced by Murdoch's ideas of love as moral and 'looking'. Still they view love as an impartial response, a response to a feature that all human beings share.⁸ This is a stark contrast with Murdoch who views love as looking at the particular and unique (SOG). Proposing love as involving an abstraction of people is not an innocent move. It involves a certain detachment.

For Velleman, love is the impartial response to the dignity of other human beings (1999). Since all human beings share this dignity, Velleman has to explain why we love one person rather than the other. In doing so, he explains love's selectivity as a *contingent fit*, caused by how well someone's value is expressed to us by their 'empirical persona'. Velleman's point is that we have many reasons for being selective in love, without having to find differences of worth among possible love objects.

Suppose that Dante, on Velleman's account, has recognized Beatrice's 'dignity', by their 'empirical persona contingently fitting'. Dante doesn't have to do anything for this love to emerge: it just happens. Such a feeling or happening has been described many times as love (think of any romantic comedy or love song), but is it what we want 'love' to mean? I suppose that, for Beatrice, there is not much love to it. The fact that their 'fit' happens contingently means that neither Dante nor Beatrice had any part in it, and bear no responsibility whatsoever. The real problem is that because of this lack of agency, Dante is not really attending to Beatrice. His desires and needs are shaping a self-serving fantastical image of her. On Velleman's passive, contingent view of love, will Dante ever see the real Beatrice?

Setiya (2014), like Velleman, focuses on a feature that all human beings share and argues that this quality is enough to justify loving someone. Where Velleman cites personhood as the ground of love (1999), Setiya cites humanity (2014). He argues that it is "sufficient to justify love that its object is another human being" (p. 260). Other than Velleman, however, Setiya leaves open how one comes to value a human being, and might therefore not be liable to

⁸ While Setiya (2014) views love as an impartial response to a feature that all human beings share (namely 'humanity'), he argues that love involves partiality, such as saving one's beloved when they are drowning. The impartial response I'm questioning here is about reasons *for* love, while the partiality Setiya argues for is about actions or preferences that follow from love.

my critique about the contingent nature of Velleman's account. Setiya even specifically argues against Velleman's conception involving contingency and argues that he is open to the view that love might happen less contingently (2014, p. 262). Furthermore, Setiya specifically argues that it is justified in love to act from partial motives (2014, p. 270): it is justified to save one's wife over one or more strangers. In this sense, Setiya's conception of love might be less detached than Velleman's.

However, Setiya's view of love still involves an abstraction that Murdoch specifically avoids. Both Setiya and Velleman engage in the reasons for love debate, which discusses what justifies loving someone. Both take the following question to be important: 'Who is worthy of love?'. Consequently both arrive at views of love that justify loving for qualities that all human beings share, such as 'humanity' or 'dignity'. Setiya argues: "If there are reasons for love, they do not consist in a person's particular merits" (2014, p. 258). He concludes that "another's humanity is sufficient reason to love them: no one is unworthy of love" (2014, p. 258). I do not want to argue against the claim that 'no one is unworthy of love'. I rather propose that the debate on love and morality leaves out interesting questions. Instead of focusing on who is worthy of love (and who is not), or why we love X, we could focus on why we love (period).

Accounts like Setiya's and Velleman's that find the justification for love in a quality of the beloved, do not include responsibility on part of the loving agent. They focus too much on the beloved, and how these beloveds express their value to us. But without responsibility for the loving agent, how are we able to steer away from our ego? Such passive accounts of love allow for self-serving fantasies. If we don't want to get stuck with egocentric-fantasies-love, we need a conception of love that is equipped to steer away from it.⁹

On Murdoch's view however, for Dante to love he has to "really look" and open himself up to Beatrice (IP, SOG, p. 27). Murdoch puts emphasis on

⁹ Setiya specifically mentions the example of Dante and Beatrice as an example of momentaneous, instantaneous love, or love that is unrequited and unjustified by a history of interaction (2014, pp. 259-260). He argues that we should not treat such loves as pathological. Furthermore, he argues that we should make room in our conception of love for love at first sight and love from a distance. I do not want to argue that love at first sight or love from a distance does not exist. I argue that we need another conception of love if we don't want egocentric-fantasies-love.

our need to turn from *fantasy* to *reality*. Love provides that liberation from fantasy. It does not focus on an impersonal feature such as ‘dignity’ and is not a passive endeavour. Murdoch argues that love is a realization, an opening up in the sense that it is “the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real” (S&G, E&M, p. 215). Murdoch’s theory of love is a less detached and egocentric version of the concept: we must adapt our concept of the other to the uniqueness of the particular people we meet. Dante has to adapt his concept of Beatrice to the particular, unique and *real* human being she is.

We can now see a clear divide between egocentric-fantasies-love and seeing-the-real-other-love. What would have happened if Dante had engaged in a Murdochian practice of focusing our attention outside ourselves? If he hadn’t constructed a fantasy through his own desires and needs? If he had not let his ego guide him, but had actively looked at Beatrice? He might have seen that Beatrice was someone other than himself, someone outside his art, his emotions, and his intellect. Our desires tend to make us ignorant of the things around us; make everything around us fit the concepts that we already have or believe to be true. But when we love on Murdoch’s account, we can come to know new concepts, new realities and it is more likely that we won’t get stuck in our own self-serving worlds. Murdoch is trying to tell us that it is not love that is blind, but our ego.¹⁰

How does this fit with the ameliorative project? In LP2 I elaborate on why egocentric fantasies are particularly harmful. Historically, fantasies about certain groups – e.g. women or BIPOC¹¹ – have been used to oppress these groups. In the paper I mention fantasies such as that women would be fulfilled from their housework (Friedan, 1963), all women sharing similar experiences to those of the middle white class (hooks, 2000a) or fantasies of female beauty (Wolf, 1991). Conceptions of love that allow for such harmful fantasies do not fit the ameliorative project: viewing love in the light of social justice we call on love to break down barriers between oppressors and the oppressed. I will further substantiate this claim and the claim that egocentric

¹⁰ I use ‘blind’ here since this refers to the popular phrase ‘love is blind’. See the section ‘A note on ‘looking’’ for a more elaborate statement on the use of the words ‘blind’ and ‘blindness’ and its ableist connotations.

¹¹ BIPOC stands for Black, Indigenous, and people of colour.

fantasies are harmful, below, when offering the second new Murdochian perspective (e.g. in the section ‘Collective self-serving fantasies’). For now I want to focus on the dichotomy egocentric-fantasies-love (Velleman, Setiya) versus seeing-the-real-other-love (Murdoch), accepting that only the latter fits the ameliorative project.

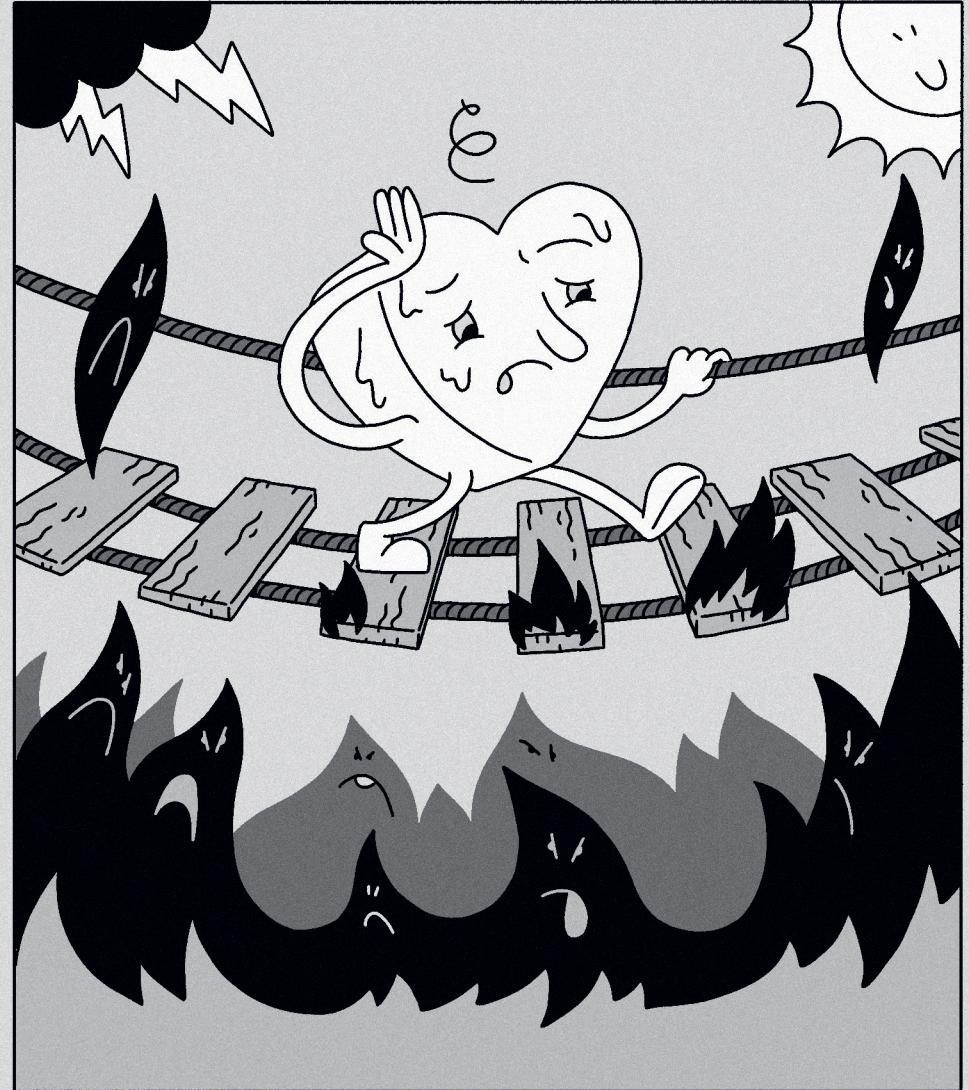
So far I have criticized Velleman’s and Setiya’s accounts for viewing love as *passive*. In addition I want to critique their views for viewing love as *perfected*. Velleman and Setiya both fail to incorporate the progressive nature of love that Murdoch argues important to become better human beings. Rather than looking at love as ‘achieved’ or ‘successful’ when valuing a person, we should think of the concept ‘love’ as an ongoing practice. We are successful when we engage in this activity, not when we reach a particular goal, such as a contingent fit in which we value a person’s dignity. For Murdoch, love is a progressive attempt which can be infinitely perfected (IP, SOG, p. 23). It is the process of seeing the reality of others, an ongoing practice of being perceptive.

In LP2 I suggest what happens when Dante would engage in a Murdochian loving practice. He might learn that Beatrice is interested in mathematics, is a big fan of hip-hop and has a birth mark on her left forearm. Although he now has some knowledge of the real Beatrice, the moment Dante quits this practice the dangers of the ego are lurking. Firstly, he doesn’t learn more about Beatrice and harmful fantasies could prevail. Secondly, Beatrice could change – e.g. changing her musical preference from hip-hop to neo-soul – and Dante would be stuck with an old image of her, back again at being ignorant to the real Beatrice. The ongoing aspect of love as a practice is important to ensure that we don’t fall back on egocentric fantasies. Velleman’s and Setiya’s accounts of love are not equipped to incorporate this important aspect.

The new Murdochian perspective that I have offered here is mainly a negative one: current discussions in the analytic philosophy of love debate miss out on discussing moral love, and those accounts that do view love as moral run the risk of egocentric-fantasies-love. In the following section I will offer my second new Murdochian perspective. Here, I take a more positive route. I will argue that a Murdochian view is relevant for contemporary

INTRODUCTION

fights in social justice. In doing so, I will take Murdoch's theory to a next step, incorporating insights from feminist philosophy, critical theory and social epistemology.



A new Murdochian perspective: social justice

Reality is that which is.

The English word ‘real’ stems from a word which meant *regal*, of or pertaining to the king.

‘Real’ in Spanish means *royal*.

Real property is that which is proper to the king.

Real estate is the estate of the king.

Reality is that which pertains to the one in power, is that over which he has power, is his domain, his estate, is proper to him.

The ideal king reigns over everything as far as the eye can see. His eye. What he cannot see is not royal, not real.

He sees what is proper to him.

To be real is to be visible to the king

The king is in his counting house.

Excerpt from ‘To Be and To Be Seen’ in Marilyn Frye’s *The Politics of Reality* (1983, p. 155, last italics added).

The second offering of a new Murdochian perspective contrasts with the first on a few points. First, it is not necessarily introducing Murdochian concepts into existing debates, but instead, adding a contemporary perspective to her original theory. While the first was mainly a negative one, critiquing the existing debate, the perspective I offer here is more positive. It continues the project where it left off. I have argued that the current debate misses out on discussing moral love, and those accounts that do view love as moral run the risk of love being egocentric. The perspective I offer here can be seen as a suggestion to fill this gap.

The argument here is twofold. I will argue that egocentric fantasies are particularly harmful, while focusing on social justice debates. Second, I suggest that Murdoch’s conception of love helps us move away from these egocentric fantasies. In doing so, I will take Murdochian thought to a next step, incorporating insights from feminist philosophy, critical theory and

epistemology. I will take Murdoch’s rather individualistic approach, and make it a more political approach, focusing on social structures. It takes the ameliorative project as its central question: could Murdoch’s conception of love make our society a better place?

From early on Murdoch talks about the need for a recognition or realization of “a vast and varied reality outside ourselves” (SBR, E&M, p. 282). She criticizes her contemporaries for neglecting ‘reality’. But, as Broackes (2012) notes, one might easily wonder what ‘reality’ Murdoch had in mind: “was knowing this reality a question of knowing simply *the states of mind of other people*, or of knowing *general principles of morality*, or of knowing some *transcendent metaphysical facts* – or what?” (2012, p. 35, italics in text). Here I do have a specific reality in mind: a political reality, a reality of power and oppression.

While Murdoch does not explicitly incorporate a socio-political perspective in her theory, I see no obstacles in adding this perspective. In doing so I depart from Murdoch’s later writings in which she argues that morals and politics ought to be separate domains (MGM). I suggest that in adding this perspective, Murdoch’s answer to the question ‘How we become morally better’ remains intact. We are just spelling out her theory in more detail, adding a political and social dimension.

Collective self-serving fantasies

Murdoch tells us that the ego is our enemy in becoming morally better. We are too focused on our own desires, needs and thoughts, which leads us to engage in self-serving fantasies. How to translate this to a socio-political perspective? I have already argued above, with the example of Dante and Beatrice, that a loving relationship including such fantasies is not what we would want ‘love’ to mean – especially if we were Beatrice. In LP2 I take this example further and argue that egocentric fantasies are particularly harmful when this happens on a collective level (e.g. in the section ‘Real people vs. fantasies’). The paper focuses mainly on feminism, taking Dante’s view of Beatrice as an example of self-serving fantasies about women, but not seeing the real woman, in this case Beatrice. Here I will give a similar, additional argument. Here I will focus on race, as another example of how Murdoch’s

view is relevant for contemporary fights for social justice.

In a book review of *White Innocence* (not included in this dissertation) I have connected Murdoch's work with the work of anthropologist and queer theorist Gloria Wekker (2016).¹² Wekker illustrates how exactly egocentric fantasies can be harmful on a collective level. Wekker explores the paradoxical nature of Dutch culture: the passionate denial of racial discrimination and colonial violence coexisting alongside aggressive racism and xenophobia. Wekker accesses, in her own words, a "cultural archive" (p. 33) built over 400 years of colonial rule, in order to challenge the dominant narrative of the Netherlands (p. 35-36) as a 'gentle' and 'ethical' nation. This self-image, she argues, is a self-serving fantasy.

Wekker deconstructs this dominant self-image of innocence. She reveals it as harmful and carefully polished by the ego of the dominant white view. The indifference towards both the Dutch colonial past and experiences that differ from the dominant view, i.e. non-white perspectives, have shaped the collective self-image of the Dutch as innocent.

The act of confronting individuals with the realities of a violent past should logically seek to undermine this sense of innocence. Like Murdoch argues: we can adjust our concepts to the reality outside us. However, as Wekker demonstrates and as Murdoch notes, this is a very difficult task. The ego is self-protective and does not give up its constructed fantasies so easily. The opposition that exists between the self-conceptualization of the Dutch as 'innocent' and the violence of a colonial past is difficult for the dominant view and its ego to fully come to terms with and to accept.

Wekker writes that erosion of this self-image of innocence, for example when the self-image is confronted with the Dutch imperial presence, does not automatically lead to a sense of guilt, remorse or culpability. In contrast, it can actually evoke racist violence, and often results in the continuing concealment, and thus preservation of structural racism. Confrontation with the workings of race in this way often leads to utterances of fragility, defensiveness, and hostility from white facets of society. This process shows how white privilege works to preserve the mechanisms that allow it to function: the invisibility and unnameability of systemic racism, and the

normalization and naturalization of whiteness. This is similar to Murdoch arguing that our ego works to preserve its constructed fantasies that in turn protect our ego. Escaping the ego is a difficult task.

Wekker's analysis of 'the Dutch ego' functions as an extensive illustration of the workings of the ego and the moral need to look beyond it. With *White Innocence* Wekker demonstrates that self-serving fantasies are harmful, perpetuating – in this particular example – systemic racism and the normalization of whiteness. While Wekker is engaged in a descriptive project of the invisibility and normality of whiteness, I am interested in a normative theory of how to fight this invisibility, the dominance of the white perspective and the ignorance of its ego. For Murdoch, as we have seen, the answer lies in loving attention: coming to know the reality outside us as a self-correcting mechanism. In Wekker's case this would mean that the dominant white view deepens their concept of 'the Dutch self' and learns that it is not that innocent.

Epistemology

Murdoch's theory is all about how knowledge and attention are deeply intertwined. In the papers I do not make the link with epistemology very explicit, but I think it is important to make this connection here. For Murdoch, loving attention is the faculty by which we come to know the Real and the Good (IP, SOG). But this coin has another side: not paying attention leads to not knowing the Real/Good, Murdoch argues (IP, SOG). Here I want to introduce some epistemological concepts in order to make the socio-political relevance of Murdochian thought more clear. When we say that not paying attention leads to not knowing, we might as well say that *indifference* leads to *ignorance*. Particularly ignorance is an important concept in contemporary social epistemology.

While knowledge plays an important role in Murdoch's ethics, there are not many epistemologists that are influenced by Murdoch's philosophy. There is Marilyn Frye, who is influenced by Murdoch and discusses 'ignorance' in combination with social justice. However, she is not part of the contemporary academic epistemological debate. Supposedly this is because she makes her most important points in a bundle of essays in 1983, *The Politics of Reality*, which does not take the form of contemporary academic

¹² See Bafort, A.S., Claeys, M., Malomgré, K., Moormann, E., Ropianyk, A., Spreeuwenberg, L., Van Puyvelde, V. (2021). What are you reading? *DiGeSt-Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 8 (1), pp. 106-117.

discussions in epistemology. According to the cover, the book is categorized as ‘essays in feminist theory’, not epistemology. Her views are however very similar to those in contemporary social epistemology.

In what follows I will shortly discuss literature on ignorance and social justice (e.g. Frye) and explain how these are very similar to Murdoch’s views. I will show the similarities between these epistemological theories and Murdoch’s ideas in order to show that we can interpret and use Murdochian ideas in a way that is relevant for contemporary fights for social justice. As noted before, I think this is not limited to either feminism or anti-racism, or any other particular struggle against oppression. Here, I will continue the focus on the example ‘race’.

Charles Mills argues in *The Racial Contract* (1997) that racism involves an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance. Nancy McHugh (2014) has connected Mills’ view with Frye’s *The Politics of Reality*, in particular with Frye’s essays ‘On Being White’ and ‘To Be and Be Seen’ (1983). McHugh (2014) notes how both Mills and Frye talk of ignorance as an active refusal to know and how both authors ask white people to understand how they have participated in active ignorance, refusing to see the reality in front of them. This is similar to Murdoch who asks us, more generally I admit, to actively look outside ourselves to see the reality that we have not seen before.

Mills argues that the racial contract is a collective agreement to “misinterpret” the world (1997, p. 18, italics in text). This misinterpretation is an “inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (1997, p. 18, italics in text). Mills writes here that ignorance is experienced as knowledge because it provides a view of the world that is *cohesive with whites’ expectations* (Mills, 1997; McHugh, 2014). This is similar to what Murdoch writes about the workings of the ego: focusing on our own needs and desires (e.g. whites’ expectations) results in engaging in self-serving fantasies (a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions). In SGC she writes:

By opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us. We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating

an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil which partially conceals the world. Our states of consciousness differ in quality, our fantasies and reveries are not trivial and unimportant, they are profoundly connected with our energies and our ability to choose and act. (SGC, SOG, p. 82)

Murdoch’s ‘falsifying veil which conceals the world’ is similar to Mills talking about how whites will be unable to understand the world as it is.

Before *The Racial Contract* was published, Frye already analysed the role of ignorance in the construction and maintenance of power (1983). She argues that privileged ways of ‘knowing’ – she mentions ‘masculine knowing’ and ‘white reality’ – which for her are really sites of *not knowing*, prevent seeing and knowing while actively constructing ignorance. I think Frye is heavily influenced by Murdoch, but she does not refer to Murdoch throughout the book, since it is a collection of essays without citations or references. In the preface of the book however, she lists twelve women who have “significantly and traceably influenced” her (1983, p. ix). Iris Murdoch is one of them.

Those that are familiar with Murdoch’s ideas recognize it in Frye’s writing. For example, Frye writes: “Every choice or decision I make is made in a matrix of options. Racism distorts and limits that matrix in various ways. My being on the white side of racism leaves me a different variety of options that are available to a woman of color” (1983, p. 113). This is very similar to what Murdoch says about how “I can only choose within the world I can see” (IP, SOG, pp. 35-36). Our distorted view – in this case coming from being white in a world where being white is normalized – limits our options of choice. Frye also speaks of “educating oneself about the experiences and perspectives of the peoples one is ignorant about” as a “corrective to the errors of one’s ways” (1983, p. 118). She argues that we should study our own ignorance (p. 118). This is very similar to how Murdoch argues that we should try to move away from our self-serving fantasies, by becoming aware of the reality outside us.

Murdoch, Mills and Frye all argue that ignorance, in this sense, is a choice. Frye writes: “Ignorance is not something simple: it is not a simple lack, absence or emptiness, and it is not a passive state. Ignorance [...] is a complex result of many acts and many negligences (1983, p. 118). The answer for Frye, like Murdoch, “lies with the matter of attention” (1983, p.

After Mills, combining ignorance with political realities gained popularity in the contemporary debate. Again, we can lay Murdoch's theory as a framework upon these works. Like the works of Mills and Frye, these contemporary works are much more focused on specific self-serving fantasies than Murdoch's theory, but they nevertheless show compatibility.

Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance for example, builds upon Mills' claim that racism involves an epistemology of ignorance (Sullivan and Tuana, 2007). It is a collection of articles in which contributors explore how different forms of ignorance linked to race are produced and sustained – how does a lack of loving attention to a particular social structure come about – and what role they play in promoting racism and white privilege – how does a lack of loving attention maintain self-serving fantasies. They argue that the ignorance that underpins racism is not a simple gap in knowledge, “the accidental result of an epistemological oversight” (2007, p. 1). Instead, in the case of racial oppression, ignorance often is “actively produced for purposes of domination and exploitation” (2007, p. 1). We could see this as a socio-political version of how Murdoch argues that the ego protects the self, albeit spelled out in more detail, adding structures of power. Sullivan and Tuana conclude that understanding ignorance and the politics of such ignorance,

[...] should be a key element of epistemological and social and political analyses, for it has the potential to reveal the role of power in the construction of what is known and provide a lens for the political values at work in knowledge practices. (2007, p. 2)

While this is thus largely a descriptive project, aiming for understanding the workings of ignorance, Murdoch offers us a moral theory of how to go beyond this. We have a responsibility to fight this ignorance. Engaging in loving attention as an infinite practice is how we become morally better people.

In another important work in contemporary social epistemology, *The Epistemology of Resistance* (2012) José Medina similarly explores the epistemic side of oppression, focusing on racial and sexual oppression and their interconnections. Medina elucidates how members of different groups

don't interact epistemically in fruitful ways, such as listening to each other (loving attention), learning from each other and mutually enriching each other's perspectives (deepening our concepts). Medina concludes that only through the cultivation of practices of resistance can we develop a social imagination that can help us become sensitive to the suffering of excluded and stigmatized subjects. This ‘social imagination’ that can help us become more sensitive could be Murdoch's concept of ‘loving attention’ which helps us become sensitive to the reality of other people.

From fantasy to reality

Frye argues that privileged ways of ‘knowing’ are really sites of not knowing (1983). These sites of power present illusory claims to ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ and have the power to maintain this illusion. Ignorance here creates “the conditions that ensures its continuance” (Frye, 1983, p. 120). We have already seen that Murdoch has the solution to these distortions of truth: through loving attention we come to see reality as it is.

‘Loving attention’ could be a practice to expose overlooked experiences of marginalized people. Privileged ignorance, as discussed in Wekker, Mills, Frye and others, functions to uphold oppressive structures. A moral practice of ‘loving attention’ actively combats such ignorance by not focusing on ourselves, but attending to the reality of others beyond the dominant or privileged group that we might belong to.

People who are not aware of their privileges or general dominance in society might raise their own awareness through practicing ‘loving attention’ and thus for example dismantle the normality of whiteness that Wekker refers to. For example, white feminists might come to realize through loving attention that they have ignored Black women’s experiences which has often resulted in a one-dimensional feminism that benefits white women only (hooks, 2000a; Lorde, 1984/2012). Loving attention could be the way in which feminists can acknowledge differences between women, which Black feminists such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Kimberly Crenshaw and Gloria Wekker have argued is so important.

With the publication of *White Innocence*, Wekker demonstrated how individuals seek to uphold a whole structure of systems from which they might benefit,

whether this is deliberate or not. The book was received in the Netherlands with much hostility: many critiqued Wekker for being ‘unscientific’ and ‘ignorant of Dutch culture’, specifically in relation to the Black Pete tradition and its ‘real history’. These supposedly methodological and epistemological critiques are grounded in ignorance of the dominant group, thus precisely illustrating Wekker’s point that white privilege ensures the preservation of the invisibility and normality of whiteness. It is very difficult to pierce this veil of illusions and move from fantasy to reality. However, if the critics had actively engaged in a practice of focusing on the reality outside themselves, looking beyond their illusion of Dutch culture as non-racist, they might have been able to ‘deepen their concept’ of Dutch culture, and consequently might not have engaged in such hostile critiques against Wekker.

As the book’s reception in the Netherlands demonstrates, the confrontation with systems from which people are perhaps benefitting creates an important discomfort. This is precisely the “very difficult realization” that Murdoch is writing about (S&G, E&M, p. 215). Murdoch shows us that the willingness to feel this discomfort is essential for every human being who wants to become morally better.

Furthermore, this is our never-ending homework: vulnerability, humility, becoming sensitive to the reality of others. In our society, vulnerability is seen as a weakness. A necessary consequence of a patriarchal, imperialistic, capitalistic and ableist society. We are encouraged to win and dominate, not to recognize that we are imperfect. I have already written about Murdoch’s argument of how moral tasks are characteristically endless (IP, SOG, p. 27). Murdoch’s legacy is that we dare to question our own perception, and that we must do so infinitely (IP, SOG, p. 23). Loving attention is a matter of progress. Not competition or dominance, but vulnerability and humility are a prerequisite for (moral) growth.

Attention politics and false suns

It is not strange that a dominant privileged group is unaware of its dominance. How can a privileged group view the reality of marginalized groups when such stories often don’t reach them? Frye has called this “the arrogant eye” (1983, p. 70). It is easy to remain unaware of this power when you are in a privileged position (see Iris Marion Young’s *Five faces of oppression*, 2011, or

Gloria Wekker’s *White Innocence*, 2016).

Audre Lorde calls this dominant position “the mythical norm” (1984/2012, p. 135). She argues that we do not speak of differences between people, but of deviation from the norm. Dominant groups make their own perspective of the world invisible, while at the same time stereotyping and marking the marginalized group as the Other. Iris Marion Young has called this ‘cultural imperialism’ (2004). In a transphobic society, for example, the experience of cisgender individuals can be understood as representative of the human experience in general, and the experiences of trans individuals can be labeled as deviant and inferior. Those who fall outside the mythical norm can come to believe that dominant fantasy as well: the cultural imperialism is internalized. Trans people start to consider their own experiences as deviant or inferior.

Those who conform to the mythical norm are not encouraged to focus their attention outside themselves or their own group. They are not encouraged to engage in ‘unselfing’, to use the Murdochian term. Consequently, this lack of ‘unselfing’ leads to an illusion of neutrality, or what Frye calls a ‘false universalization’. Frye writes:

As feminists we are very familiar with the male version of this: the men write and speak and presumably, therefore, also think, as though whatever is true of them is true of everybody. White people also speak in universals. [...] Much of what [white feminists] have said is accurate only if taken to be about white women and white men within white culture [...] [t]o our minds the people we were writing about were *people*. We don’t think of ourselves as *white*. (1983, p. 117, italics in text)

This supposed ‘neutrality’ or ‘universalization’ is by no means harmless. Like Wekker has showed in *White Innocence* (2016), collective dominant fantasies uphold oppressive structures.

Murdoch recognizes how we can be ignorant of our own partiality. In SGC Murdoch warns us that it is difficult to look at the sun (i.e. the Good). There are dangers of masochism and worship of false suns (SOG, p.97). The fire in Plato’s cave is such a false sun, she writes. We may interpret it as symbolizing the self: “the old unregenerate psyche, that great source of energy and warmth” (SGC, SOG, p. 98).

Like we see reality ‘in the light of the Good’, adhering to ‘the mythical norm’ and ‘false universalization’ is a consequence of looking at the world in the light of false suns. Dominant worldviews are taken to be an ideal endpoint for those who hold them: this is what the world looks like, they will argue. They might be the released prisoners in the cave that are now fascinated by the fire, and advance no further. The real sun and the real Good, however, are outside the cave. Frye writes:

It is an important breakthrough for a member of a dominant group to come to know s/he is a member of a group, to know that what s/he is only a part of humanity. It was breath-taking to discover that in the culture I was born and reared in, the word ‘woman’ means white woman, just as [...] the word ‘man’ means male man. This sudden expansion of the scope of one’s perception can produce a cold rush of awareness of the arbitrariness of the definitions, the brittleness of these boundaries. Escape becomes thinkable. (1983, p. 117)

Escaping the cave is thinkable. We have to escape from the cave. We must fight our collective indifference to those who deviate from the norm.

There are real differences between all of us, but it is not those differences that separate us, writes Lorde (1984/2012). Rather, it is our refusal to acknowledge those differences. Murdoch understood the importance of difference. She specifically argues against the universalization of moral pictures when offering her distinctive theory against her contemporaries. Murdoch’s article VCM presents Liberalism as a questionable moral or political stance, embedded in the supposedly ‘neutral’ views of her peers (cf. MGM). Their picture of the ‘logic’ of morality turns out to be the logic merely of those moral systems that fit with their own ‘Liberal atheist’ or ‘Protestant Christian’ traditions (VCM, p. 96). Murdoch claims: “moral philosophy should remain at the level of the differences” (VCM, p. 57). Her claim is limited to moral philosophy, but the line of thought and conclusion is very similar to what I have written here. Murdoch understood that supposed knowledge of abstraction/objectivity is an illusion.

We are not objective, all-seeing, all-knowing beings, as Murdoch tells us. Inevitably, every one of us has their own frame of reference through which we see the world. Inevitably, we all have different access to knowledge, and make different decisions based on this knowledge. Murdoch argues that we act according to the kind of people we are (IP, SOG). She might have been referring to different individual characters only (Blum, 2012, 2022), so how does this fit the aims of the new Murdochian perspective I am offering here?

From individual to social

In the section ‘Iris Murdoch in context’ I have already mentioned that Murdochian scholarship questions whether and how the individual nature of Murdoch’s theory can be reconciled with a socio-political project (e.g. Blum, 2012, 2022; Clarke, 2012; Hämäläinen, 2015, Lovibond, 2011). I hope to have shown in the previous sections that we can indeed *use* Murdochian concepts in this way. I have taken Murdoch’s rather individualistic approach to a more political approach, focusing on social structures. Now I want to shortly discuss whether we can *interpret* Murdoch in this way, using Blum’s critique as a framework to look at this problem.

Blum criticizes Murdoch for concentrating on personal rather than social obstacles to moral perception (2012). He criticizes her for focusing on “individual psychology”, “with very little appreciation of the social and cultural forms of the distorting images that block an appreciation of [...] other human beings” (2012, p. 317). Blum argues that personal fantasy is not the only source of distortion in the views we have of other persons. Often there is a social or cultural source of distorted images (2012, p. 216).

I agree with Blum that social or cultural sources distort our images of others. In contrast, however, I think this is compatible with Murdoch’s view. The focus on group-identity (e.g. the examples above about gender and race) might at first seem un-Murdochian, because 1) she talks about the moral psychology of individuals and 2) she takes the particular and unique as an object of loving attention. But it is possible to simply include the fact of a membership of a certain group in one’s overall view of someone, as Clarke has already noted (2012, p. 250). Clarke argues that: “perception of social structure [is] an implicit part of Murdochian attention” (2012, p. 251).

Blum is right that Murdoch does not talk about social structures in her moral theory, but it is not excluded from the theory, either. It is perhaps not only possible to add this to her theory (as I have shown in previous sections) but to interpret her concept of loving attention in this way, as Clarke does. I think we cannot separate ‘personal fantasy’ from ‘social or cultural sources’. These are deeply intertwined. I suggest that viewing Murdoch’s theory from a societal and political level is not at all a contrasting move (*pace* her later views on morals and politics in chapter twelve of MGM).

Specifically a theory which entire core is looking as an obedience to reality, must admit that we are never separate individuals. No one can escape social structures. Murdoch’s theory is so appealing precisely because it moves towards an increasingly realistic view of the people around us and their lived realities in certain structures. The social structures as they are at that moment are part of that realistic world view. We must take Murdoch’s theory, that is often used to talk about individual character and individual (moral) actions, out of this abstract vacuum, and bring it to a social level that is part of our lived realities.

I suggest that Murdoch wanted to focus on the individual to expose the moral inner life – against the view that claims that “mental concepts must be analysed, genetically and so the inner must be thought of as parasitic upon the outer” (IP, SOG, p. 10) – or on the individual as the particular – as opposed to complete abstractness (MGM, p. 190) – but Murdochian loving attention *does not need to view the individual as opposed to social structures*.

Still critics can bring up the argument that Murdoch herself specifically states in MGM that morals ought to be kept separate from politics. I think her change in thought (between VCM/HT and MGM) might have to do with her “fear of political perfection”, as Gary Browning calls it (2018, p. 4). This fear may be partly explained by her condemnation of the totalitarian events happening in Eastern Europe in the second half of the twentieth century, which she uses as an example throughout the relevant chapter in MGM.

For Murdoch, morality takes place in the inner life: bringing this inwardness to the political domain is dangerous, she argues (MGM). We risk fanaticism: “political idealism and even social earnestness can lead to

callousness and cruelty” (p. 360). She concludes that “the acceptance of parliamentary democratic government itself involves a deliberate limitation of our morally inspired activity” (p. 362). What Murdoch fears is that we bring the inwardness necessary to act morally to the political level (MGM, pp. 360, 362). She fears that this inwardness will lead to fanaticism and totalitarianism.

It is not difficult to see why this is the object of her fear: Murdoch’s theory revolves around concepts such as ‘ego’ and ‘fantasy’. But what she fears about morals invading politics is (*the illusion of*) *perfection*, not necessarily *morality in politics in general*. She fears political perfection, the illusion of the fanatic who thinks they have the one and true view of how the world should work. It is this fear that causes Murdoch to separate morals from politics entirely.

However, we do not need to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Fanatism and (*the illusion of*) *perfection* are not a necessary consequence of bringing morals into politics. Since Murdoch’s answer to the question ‘how to become better human beings?’ is actively fighting this illusion of perfection, I do not see why we can’t apply this to the political domain.

I thus think Murdoch makes a mistake in her later statements about morals and politics, in that these are incoherent with her moral philosophy. In MGM she argues for morals and politics to be separate domains and distinguishes private/moral from public/political (p. 355). This dichotomy is a contrasting move within her own writing: Murdoch regards the reality that is ‘outside’ the loving/attending individual as morally important, e.g. her view of moral realism as ‘other persons’. Social and political structures are simply a part of this reality. Keeping politics out of morals is thus an unattainable ‘ideal’. The appeal for Murdoch of both the concepts ‘love’ and ‘knowledge’ is precisely that they are both transcending: we realize that we are part of something bigger. It makes sense to incorporate a socio-political perspective in Murdochian thought, as social structures are one of the bigger things we are part of. Judging by what Murdoch later wrote in MGM, she would not endorse the feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’. However her focus on ‘the particular other’ is precisely able to do just that: acknowledging the political in the personal (similar claims are argued for by Clarke, 2012 and Hämäläinen, 2015).

While I argue that it is possible to both use and interpret Murdoch in this way, Blum does have a point: in not making social and cultural structures explicit, Murdoch leaves us with an *incomplete* answer to the question ‘how we become morally better’ (2012). He writes:

Murdoch’s moral philosophy shows very little appreciation of the social and cultural forms of the distorting image that block an appreciation of the humanity and the individual reality of other human beings. Murdoch confines her rich insights into the myriad ways, neglected by so many other moral philosophers, that self-centered energy and personal fantasy subtly and not-so-subtly block such appreciation. An analogous analysis could have been given, of the operations of entrenched social and culturally-generated stereotypes, [...]. (2012, pp. 317 – 318)

Similarly, Martha Nussbaum argues: “Murdoch seems almost entirely to lack interest in the political and social determinants of a moral vision and in the larger social critique that ought [...] to be a major element in the struggle against one’s own defective tendencies” (2001, p. 32). I agree with Blum and Nussbaum that Murdoch does not give said analysis or larger social critique. However, as I aim to show in this dissertation, this gap can be filled with Murdochian concepts, supplemented with contemporary feminist ideas, insights from critical theory and concepts from social epistemology. By putting ‘love’ at the centre of morality, incorporating the importance of perception, conceptual scheme and the realization that we are all imperfect, Murdoch paved the way for the view I imagine Blum and Nussbaum would like to see. Murdoch paved the way for philosophers to focus on exclusion and injustice that occur when we acquire knowledge, focusing on perception as a morally important concept. In this sense, Murdoch paved the way for disciplines such as social epistemology.

Worries about unselfing

Unselfing makes us morally better people, argues Murdoch (SGC, SOG, p. 82). Above I have argued for a socio-political perspective of that claim. But particularly from a social justice perspective, Murdoch has been critiqued because of this emphasis on unselfing (Lovibond, 2011; Nelson, 1992). The

worry is that unselfing and other-directed attention can degenerate into self-effacement and that this makes ‘loving attention’ dedicated to an ideology of subordination. Murdoch’s corrective to egotism has led several philosophers to express feminist worries or label Murdoch’s views as misogynist (Lovibond, 2011; Manne, 2017, pp. 31-32; Nelson, 1992). Hilde Nelson writes:

Neither Weil nor Murdoch seem to have devoted much thought to the political consequences for women of a morality that promotes receptivity and submission. Yet while both women argue that overcoming the self is precisely what allows one to be genuinely free [...], those of us who find selflessness rather too amenable to the morality of Kirche, Küche, und Kinder may be forgiven for being skeptical about this route to freedom under present social conditions. (1992, p. 14)

In *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*, Lovibond raises similar critiques (2011): the good person, according to Murdoch’s moral picture, must be humble, is passive, attends to others and is receptive. These are characteristics of the submissive social role and a description of the “internalized feminine ideal that has made women easily manageable in patriarchal societies” (Hämäläinen, 2015, p. 746). Taking this feminist concern more broadly, one could argue that it is harmful to ask self-effacing practices of the marginalized – not just women – who are often, as Kate Manne (2017) describes, in the role of human giver: someone who is not privileged in most if not all major respects, and is “obligated to offer love, sex, attention, affection, and admiration, as well as other forms of emotional, social, reproductive, and caregiving labor, in accordance with social norms that govern and structure the relevant roles and relations” (p. 301).

I understand these concerns, but I do not think the Murdochian perspective I’m offering is liable to these particular critiques. Here I will shortly defend my claim against these concerns.

Above I have argued that loving attention can be used as a tool to fight privileged ignorance. At the same time, loving attention functions in a similar manner for marginalized groups. As loving attention is a corrective against self-deception, and we come to know ourselves without illusion, we can also come to know ourselves as disadvantaged when we meet advantaged others.

Loving attention can make us notice how attention itself is unequally divided, recognizing that one's group has been systematically overlooked. A Black trans woman for example, might, through loving attention, see her position in oppressive structures more clearly. For this woman, loving attention can do the opposite of harmful unselfing.

Murdoch isn't asking us to be humble towards everybody else and thereby risk self-effacement. She asks us to be humble with regard to our ego, our own knowledge and preferences and the fantasies this fabricates. Loving attention could pierce through false consciousness and does what Sara Ahmed renders so important: "you realize that the world you are in is not the world you thought you were in" (2017, p. 62).

Murdoch was aware of the fact that different people see different worlds, and that the interplay of these different visions is where we gain moral insight. The new Murdochian perspective proposed above is a revolutionary companion in our fight against oppression because of Murdoch's moral realism as 'other persons': we come to know the reality of others. We come to recognize structures and seeing ourselves in relation to others through these structures. Of course this is merely a starting point for social justice. Nevertheless it is a necessary condition for social justice: we must first have a realistic view of existing social structures, before we can think and work towards fair solutions.

Sceptics of Murdoch might still ask: If 'being good' consists in loving others by looking at them with loving and just attention, does 'being good' require us to find the most abominable immoral characters 'lovable'? But such a question shows a misunderstanding of Murdoch's concept of loving attention. A Murdochian love- or attention-based ethics only asks us to open ourselves to what we encounter, not to conform to what we see. The moral activity is attending as an obedience to *reality* (IP, SOG, p. 41), not as an obedience to *the other*. One can evaluate the other and one's relation to them, as one looks with loving attention at the other.

Attending lovingly does not entail that one will ultimately conclude with a positive appraisal of the object of attention, but that, if these are a part of reality, the positive features of the object that are there to be seen will be perceived: the appraisal of the object will be just and truthful – but not necessarily positive (Mason, 2021). The connection to virtues such as honesty

and justice suggests that loving necessarily involves negative evaluations as well as positive ones, but these will be situated within a vision of the other that is obedient to reality, as Murdoch formulates it.

Murdoch asks us to look and be open to anything beyond us, but she does not oblige us to swallow what we see at any cost. Practicing loving attention will bring us closer to the Good and the Truth (SOG). This demands shifting attention, but does not ask us to be subservient or be uncritical.

What has so far been overlooked is the promise of Murdochian loving attention as a revolutionary companion. It is only when we see oppressive structures that we can start to break them down. Loving attention creates change, because it teaches us to see what we did not see before, whether that is from a dominant or marginalized position. Both our personal history and ego play a part in constructing our world views. While we cannot change the first, we can actively steer away from the latter, constructing more realistic worldviews and corresponding solutions.

It is furthermore important to realize that, like morality, social structures are complex. Most people are both privileged and marginalized, on different aspects. I have been socialized as a woman and am therefore marginalized in this sense. But I am also white and therefore privileged in this sense. It is important to acknowledge this complexity. Through exercises in loving attention we can discover these structures and become aware of our position within these structures.

A note about 'looking'

'Looking' and 'seeing' are important concepts in Murdoch's philosophy. I consider 'looking' to be a metaphor. I take it to mean: becoming sensitive. The senses are merely tools with which to open up. Loving attention is a matter of becoming sensitive to the world: becoming aware of 'the reality outside us'. We can of course become aware of reality without eyes and with other senses. I have focused on 'looking' as a vehicle to truth, since I study Murdochian thought and for Murdoch 'looking' is an important concept. Murdoch probably focuses on looking because she is influenced by Plato, who uses the same metaphor.

When I would substitute ‘looking’ for ‘listening’ in this dissertation, the argument would still work. As an example, I want to shortly mention *The politics of listening*, a book by sociologist Leah Bassel. The aim of the book is to explore listening as a social and political process. Bassel (2017) explores listening as a ‘responsiveness to difference’ (Connolly, 1997), a humility, an attentiveness to complexity (Back, 2007). We can see similarities here with Murdoch’s emphasis on difference, humility, attention and complexity. These are all important concepts in Murdoch’s ethics (SOG, MGM). Bassel furthermore argues in line with what I have argued above: “Listening with humility and ethical care can provide a resource to understand the contemporary world while pointing to the possibility of a different kind of future” (2017, p. 4). Similar to what I have argued above about the need to pay attention to the *unseen*, Bassel writes:

Why listen? The answer is very simple and impossible at the same time: political equality. [...] It is a starting and endpoint of a politics of listening. The politics of listening has an intrinsic value, as a form of recognition that counters vicious exclusions that combine ‘race’, gender, class and means of rendering people socially abject (Tyler, 2013) and, for my purposes, *unheard*. (Bassel, 2017, p. 6, italics added)

Bassel even speaks of transformation, like Murdoch speaks about transcendence: “The politics of listening challenges norms of intelligibility, with the specific purpose of transforming audibility and breaking down binaries between ‘Us’, the audible, and ‘Them’, the silent or stigmatized Others” (2017, p. 6).

There is another important note to make about using ‘looking’ as a term, and the concepts that come with it. In both Murdochian scholarship and the papers included in this dissertation the word and verb ‘blind’ is often used. I refrained from using this word in this introductory chapter. This is a normative decision. Arguing that we can only become good people when we literally look, would condemn the visually impaired and blind to an inevitable immoral life. Over the past few years I have learned that using the term ‘blind’ is considered ableism: discrimination, marginalization and stigmatization of people with disabilities or who are perceived to be disabled.

The papers have been published, so I can’t change its language here. Through writing this dissertation I have deepened my concepts of both ‘perceiving’ and ableism. In Murdochian spirit, I accept that my knowledge is imperfect, and I will strive to use more inclusive language in the future.

Contemporary case studies and applications

So far I have offered two new Murdochian perspectives. Throughout giving my arguments I have discussed the first two papers included in this dissertation. Papers 3, 4 and 5 function as case studies and applications of what is argued for above and in the first two papers. Here I will shortly introduce these papers and explain how they link to the new Murdochian perspectives I have argued for.

The love enhancement debate

The love enhancement debate can be seen as 1) a case study of the analysis I gave above of the contemporary debate on love and morality and 2) an application of how Murdochian thought is relevant for contemporary fights for social justice. Below I will discuss two papers about love enhancement included in this dissertation – TP3 and LD4 – as illustrations of my arguments in the previous sections.

The love enhancement debate focuses on whether the use of biomedical enhancements in our romantic relationships is desirable.¹³ In ‘Taking the love pill: A reply to Naar and Nyholm’ [TP3] I argue that these discussions could be improved by looking at what specific kind of love one has in mind when arguing for or against the use of such biomedical enhancements. For simplifying purposes, I speak of these biomedical enhancements as if they were a love pill we could take, having the exact same result as the biomedical enhancements, pharmaceuticals, hormonal treatments or other technologies that come up in these discussions. Similarly to the project in DL1, I argue that which particular conception of love one has in mind has consequences for the argument and outcome. Similarly to DL1, I argue that the current

discussion could be improved or elevated when focusing on what conceptions of love are used and whether we are missing something in doing so. In the particular case of TP3: the conceptions of love used have consequences for the moral deliberation on whether taking the love pill would be desirable.

I might need to clarify some of my stances in TP3. In this paper I do not argue for a specific conception of love. For example, I state that “I do not want to argue [...] for the claim that love is or is not always directed at a particular person” (2019, p. 251). I *do* argue for such a claim in LP2, as noted above. In LP2 I argue that we should think of love directed at particular and unique human beings, instead of aiming our love at impersonal qualities such as ‘dignity’ or ‘humanity’ (2021). The reason that I do not commit to a particular view in TP3 is merely because of the limited scope of the paper. This non-committing should therefore not be viewed as my overall philosophical stance on love in this dissertation.

While I do not commit myself to a specific conception of love in TP3, in its last section I am cautiously hinting at a view of love as a practice (as argued for in LP2). What we might find valuable in love, I argue, is the freedom to take up a loving activity (2019, pp. 254-255). While Murdoch is not mentioned in this paper, it still reaches a conclusion that is compatible with Murdochian thought.

We can now take the love enhancement debate as an illustration of my argument a bit further. Above I have argued that contemporary accounts of ‘moral love’ view love as ‘passive’ and thereby run the risk of egocentric-fantasies-love (see also LP2). A Murdochian view of love has advantages over these conceptions of love, as an active and furthermore ongoing practice. The love enhancement debate deals with similar problems. A Murdochian view of love can offer solutions here, too.

Similar to the project in LP2, we can ask: What do we want love to mean? In the fourth paper included in this dissertation, ‘The Non-Individualistic and Social Dimension of Love Drugs’ [LD4] Katrien Schaubroeck and I critique Brian D. Earp and Julian Savulescu for the particular conception of love they use in their arguments. In *Love Drugs: The Chemical Future of Relationships* (2020) Earp and Savulescu discuss the moral permissibility of the medicalization of love through love drugs or antilove drugs. Schaubroeck

¹³ In previous sections the discussion of the concept ‘love’ was not limited to romantic love. Since the love enhancement debate mainly focuses on romantic love, I will zoom in on this particular kind of love in this specific section. Limiting the discussion to romantic love here does however not refute my argument: this particular debate is merely an illustration of the broader argument I have made so far.



and I think the authors overlook certain interpersonal and social dynamics when they evaluate the moral permissibility of drugs for interpersonal goals, by measuring enhancement in terms of individual happiness. When investigating the moral permissibility of love drugs, we believe it is important to examine the sophisticated ways in which social norms filter into love relationships and, more specifically, into the interaction that plays out between two people. To make room for the interpersonal and social dimensions, we propose that we should not look at love as a feeling nor as an individual concern, like Earp and Savulescu do.

Instead, we best look at love as a practice that focuses outside the self. Following the same line of thought as LP2, Schaubroeck and I argue that love should be seen as an opening up to anything beyond our ego. It makes it possible to conceive of love as something else than an individualistic psychological state, by incorporating an outward focus in its very description. A practice of opening up to anything that is outside you is non-individualistic per definition: it transcends your individual being. This, in turn, makes it possible to discuss the social dimension. Placing Murdoch's conception of love within a social context, with contingent yet influential power relations, forces us to reflect more deeply on the interpersonal and social dynamics of love, before establishing the role that love drugs could play as a facilitator in the movement towards moral progress. Characterizing this practice of self-transcendence as a movement towards moral progress, as Murdoch does, offers us alternative criteria to measure love drug induced enhancement. Loving relationships always take place in a particular society with a particular history, imbued by particular norms and expectations. Hence social surroundings affect the decision to take love drugs. Given that social norms somehow always play a role in how interpersonal relationships develop, it is very plausible that the 'love problems' that Earp and Savulescu think love drugs are the solution to, resonate features of patriarchal surroundings. In the paper we elaborate on this with a few examples.

Schaubroeck and I don't object to the use of love drugs, but we think more discussion is needed on the conditions in which the use is justified. By way of constructive suggestion we propose to supplement Earp and Savulescu's plea for love drugs with the following condition: could the use of love drugs in this case be understood as facilitating the process of opening up to progression? We can view this part of LD4 in light of what Murdoch says

about love being an infinite process towards becoming better human beings.

In the paper we do not offer an objective account of what qualifies as progression. Whether someone makes progress is not always verifiable or visible from the outside. So progression remains a personal process, that pushes a person beyond the ego and the self-centred concerns, as Murdoch argues (see also the section above: ‘Imperfection and progression’).

Looking at this critique and the Murdochian solution Schaubroeck and I offer in LD4, some conclusions can be drawn for the conceptions of love that are discussed in TP3. This paper was the first academic article that I published; and so when writing it I was not yet engaged with Murdochian thought. However, in this dissertation I can incorporate it in my new Murdochian perspectives. The arguments made in LP2 and LD4 could be applied to Naar’s and Nyholm’s specific conceptions of love, too. Although this would need further argumentation, I want to make a few tentative suggestions.

When Nyholm argues that we want to be at the origin of the love others feel for us – and I argue that this is about creating or sustaining love for a particular person – we might see this in line with a Murdochian view of loving the particular and unique. In this sense, Murdoch would agree with Nyholm that a love pill that works as some kind of love potion to fall in love with a particular human being, would defy the purpose of love. I think Murdoch and Nyholm would agree on the point that we have to look at the particular and unique in human beings. For Nyholm we need to do this to ensure the final value we attribute to love. For Murdoch we need to do this to engage in moral activity: to escape our self-serving ego and see the Good in the world around us.

When Naar argues that the love pill can have a facilitating role, he has a specific conception of love. While I do not critique such a facilitating love pill in TP3 – because the argument is limited to showing that Nyholm and Naar are talking about different conceptions of love – I can offer a critique here, based on the critiques for conceptions of love discussed in both LP2 and LD4. Naar holds an individualistic view of love, that focuses on the psychological state of the lover. The critiques for Earp and Savulescu’s view might apply here, too. Furthermore, the critiques for the passive nature of Velleman’s account might apply to Naar’s conception as well. While Naar does not elaborate extensively on his conception of love in his paper that

I discuss in TP3, he does so in another paper. In ‘Love as a disposition’ (2017) Naar writes: “[...] states are not things that occur or unfold over time; [...], they persist over time. I think love is a state” (2017, pp. 14-15). Such a view would not suit a Murdochian conception of love, which necessarily has an active and progressive nature. Loving on Murdoch’s account is: deepening our concepts, unfolding reality over time. Naar argues that love is not an activity, nor a process. However, the ongoing aspect of love as an active practice is important to ensure that we don’t get stuck with egocentric-fantasies-love. Much like Velleman’s and Setiya’s accounts of love, Naar’s conception of love is not equipped to incorporate this important aspect.

For those that are particularly interested in enhancement debates, there might be a question left unanswered. If a Murdochian kind of love has advantages over other conceptions of love, could we design a love pill for the Murdochian kind of love? And assuming that the particular technology would be available, either now or in the future, would such a ‘Murdochian love pill’ be desirable?

Posing such a question would reveal a misunderstanding of what Murdochian love consists in. What would a Murdochian love pill do exactly? One might argue that it reduces our egoistic tendencies.¹⁴ However, a Murdochian view of love values *the struggle* that we have to engage in, in order to see reality clearly. Love is infinitely perfectible, argues Murdoch. Moral tasks are characteristically endless, not only because, within a concept, our efforts are imperfect, but also because as we move, really look and open up, our concepts themselves are changing (IP, SOG, p. 27). The struggle, the progression, is morally relevant. A Murdochian love pill would defy the purpose of a Murdochian view of love.

Suppose that we would want a pill to solve this struggle. Firstly, this would rather be an unrealistic goal for enhancement in the near future: such a pill should be able to make us all-knowing creatures. It should make the struggle to see clearly redundant and enable us to see the Good in all its entirety. In Plato’s analogy of the sun, a Murdochian love pill should enable us to directly stare into the sun. Besides that we can regard it unrealistic any

¹⁴ Others would argue that such drugs already exist, in the form of LSD, MDMA, psilocybin (the naturally occurring psychedelic prodrug compound produced by many fungi) or mescaline (a naturally occurring psychedelic found in mostly cacti).

technology having this effect any time soon, such a love pill is not at all what the love enhancement debate wants to discuss. As I have showed, those that want to argue for the desirability of the love pill, hold specific conceptions of love that view love as an individualistic psychological condition. A Murdochian love pill might rather be up for discussion in *moral enhancement* debates (e.g. Harris, 2011; Johnson, Bishop and Toner, 2019; Savulescu, Ter Meulen and Kahane, 2011; Wiseman, 2016). However such debates could discuss what such a Murdochian moral enhancement pill would do exactly, I suppose that it would in all likelihood defy the purpose of the ongoing moral and personal struggle that both Murdoch and I have argued so valuable. Moreover, to think of ourselves as imperfect human beings instead of aspiring to be perfect all-knowing creatures may be a more modest and enjoyable picture of humanity, too.

Cancel culture

In the fifth paper included in this dissertation, ‘The Moral Implications of Cancel Culture’ [CC5], Murdoch is not even mentioned once. Still, being the last paper I have written during my doctoral research, it is heavily influenced by Murdochian thought. The paper can be viewed as an application of how Murdochian thought is relevant for contemporary fights for social justice. It focuses on how attention is (re)distributed in contemporary society and the moral relevance of this.

In CC5, Jenny Janssens and I investigate whether we can say the phenomenon ‘cancel culture’ is morally good or bad. Eve Ng defines cancel culture as:

[T]he withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues. (2020, p. 623)

If cancel culture is viewed as a means to achieve social justice, we might be more inclined to say that cancel culture is morally good. However, one could argue – as is done in both academic philosophy and the public debate – that

cancel culture has too harsh consequences or involves immoral, even hateful, behaviour. We propose that cancel culture is used as an umbrella term for (at least) two different kinds of ‘cancelling’, one being punishment (probably bad) and the other being redistribution of attention (probably good).

The paper is heavily influenced by what I have written above about attention politics. Janssens and I argue that cancelling can be used as a tool to redistribute attention: it can remove privileged access to the public sphere and at the same time (re)claim attention and recognition for marginalized perspectives in this public sphere. In this sense, the paper shows that the concept ‘attention’ is relevant for social justice, like I have argued above.

There has been much scholarship that has celebrated the potential of social media in democratisation and social justice. Because of social media we are able to hear the stories of marginalized people, formerly lacking a platform to speak (Castells, 2015). Consequently, we can become more aware of injustices that are being done to them. Social media can be individually and collectively used as a tool to move from fantasies to realities: we become aware of the reality of social structures and others’ experiences.

CC5 includes insights from social epistemology, such as Miranda Fricker’s view about epistemic authority: some voices are heard more frequently or taken more seriously than other, more marginalized voices (2007). Fricker argues that statements by members of particular groups are systematically neglected or discredited, for example when negative social stereotypes are associated with them (2007). On the other side of that coin are those who have epistemic privilege, are being listened to, followed, liked and retweeted. Fricker is one of those philosophers who, like Murdoch, focuses on perception as a morally important concept.

CC5 also mentions how privileged voices are often ignorant of social structures, like discussed above. ‘Cancel culture’ as a phenomenon is often critiqued by those that are privileged with epistemic authority, who regard it as disproportional punishment leading to a fear of speaking out as a consequence. Meredith Clark has argued that framing cancel culture in this way has found utility among those who wish to quash any attempts to critique their social position (2020). Accountability feels like being ‘cancelled’, when you have experienced a world – a self-serving fantasy – that has enabled you or let you get away with harmful behaviour for so long. This is very similar

INTRODUCTION

to what I have described above with the example of Wekker's *White Innocence* (2016) piercing through the self-serving fantasy of the Dutch as 'innocent'. The public discussion about cancel culture – whether it's good or bad – portrays a battle for attention between the 'privileged', and everyone else, or so we argue.

Conclusion

This introductory chapter has served as an overarching argument of the dissertation. First I have given context to Murdoch's ideas that are relevant for this dissertation. In providing two new Murdochian perspectives, I have showed that Murdoch's ideas are relevant for contemporary debates in analytic philosophy, but also that her theory can be extended. The new Murdochian perspectives that I have offered can be categorized as follows:

1) Contemporary discussions in analytical philosophy of love either miss out on discussing moral love, or discuss a conception of love that does not fit the ameliorative project. Murdochian thought could offer additional insights about love and morality in these debates. Papers that follow this new Murdochian perspective:

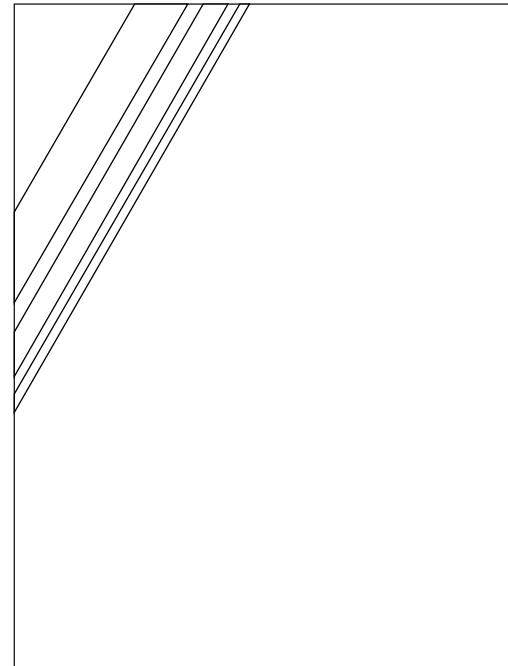
1. The Possibility of a Duty to Love [DL1]
2. 'Love' as a Practice: Looking at Real People [LP2]
3. Taking the love pill: A reply to Naar and Nyholm [TP3]
4. The Non-Individualistic and Social Dimension of Love Drugs [LD4]

2) Murdoch's conception of love is relevant for contemporary fights for social justice, through her concept of 'love' as moving from fantasy to reality, with which we come to know the lived realities of others, including social structures. Papers that follow this new Murdochian perspective:

2. 'Love' as a Practice: Looking at Real People [LP2]
4. The Non-Individualistic and Social Dimension of Love Drugs [LD4]
5. The Moral Implications of Cancel Culture [CC5]

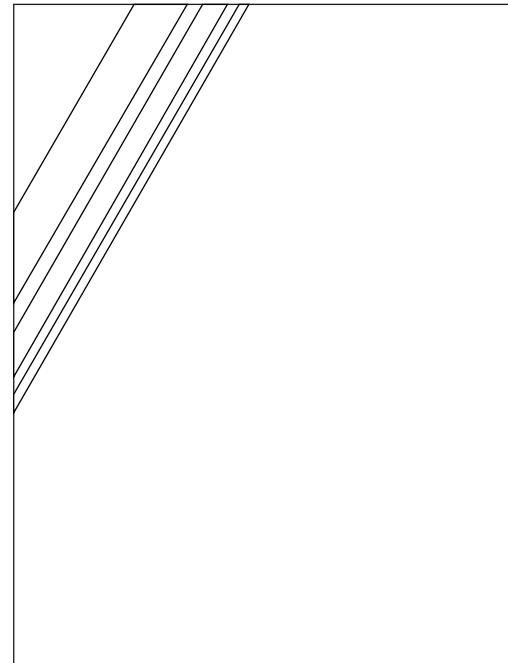
In this dissertation I have taken Murdoch to places where she is not a regular guest. In taking her to these different places, I hope to contribute not only to theoretical debates, but also to show that Murdoch's concept of 'love' is relevant for the more practical and everyday questions we have today.

The Papers



1.

The Possibility of a Duty to Love



Introduction

In *The right to be loved*, Matthew Liao claims that children have a right to be loved (2015). He argues that children, as human beings, have rights to the primary essential conditions for a good life and that being loved as children is a primary essential condition for a good life: children need to be loved in order to be adequate, functioning individuals. Therefore, he claims, children have a right to be loved. Liao furthermore argues that all human beings have a moral duty to provide that love, addressing objections that there would be no appropriate obligation-holder if parents die while a child is young.

This moral obligation to provide love is considered controversial. Could there be such a thing as a duty to love? Mhairi Cowden criticizes Liao by arguing that there might be a right to care, but not to love (2012). This raises questions about what ‘love’ entails. Whether love can be the object of an obligation might depend on what kind of love one has in mind. Some philosophers think of love as an emotion (Brogard, 2015; Liao, 2015; Solomon, 1993; Velleman, 1999), or a syndrome (De Sousa, 2015; Pismenny and Prinz, 2017; Pismenny, 2018), others think of love as a volitional disposition (Frankfurt, 2009), still others think of love as a way of looking (Jollimore, 2011; Murdoch, SOG). What kind of love one has in mind is not what the debate about Liao’s claim focuses on.

The debate about a moral duty to love surrounding Liao’s claim centers on the practical question of regulation (e.g. Cowden, 2012) or the question what happens when children are not loved (e.g. Ferracioli, 2014; Liao, 2015). Cowden focuses on what kind of obligations and responsibilities such a duty would imply, the regulation of such a right, and the boundary between public and private spheres, and concludes there cannot be a duty to love. Liao and Laura Ferracioli focus on the child’s need for attention, care, and affective bonds to achieve healthy development or, in Ferracioli’s terms, in order to lead a ‘meaningful life’ (2014), and conclude that children have a right to be loved. In an effort to answer worries related to both regulation and children’s development, Mar Cabezas adds to the debate that “the right to be loved can be translated into a right to be *well-loved* and to love *well*” (2016, italics in text).

The questions they pose, however, are not the only philosophical questions one can ask regarding the possibility of a moral duty to love. Even

Abstract: In contemporary philosophy of love many objections have been raised against a duty or moral obligation to love. Many of these views deny compatibility of love and morality, arguing that love is partial, while morality is an impartial domain. It has been argued that love is not a response to reasons, love or emotions in general are not under our control, love is not something that can be claimed, or that we cannot really love someone if we act for duty’s sake. This paper investigates and reviews these objections; removing the obstacles for a duty to love. On a different conception of love (loving for reasons, controllable love) and a different conception of duties (detached from the notion of making claims, motivations of love being compatible with motivations of duty) the duty to love may appear more plausible.

In this dissertation this article is referred to as ‘DL1’.

This article appeared as:

Spreeuwenberg, L. (2022). The Possibility of a Duty to Love, in Brogaard, B. & Pismenny, A. (eds.), *The Moral Psychology of Love* (pp. 193-211). Rowman & Littlefield.

if Cowden is correct in pointing out how a right formulated in Liao's way would imply many difficulties in the discourse of rights and duties, we do not need to throw the baby out with the bathwater. What if we zoom out? We do not need to focus on regulation, or what 'providing love' entails, to say something about a duty to love. Similarly, we do not need to focus on love particularly for *children*, or the consequences of a lack of love.

Zooming out from this discussion, this paper examines four objections to the idea that we have duties to love. Some philosophers take issue with love being something that we can claim or control (Darwall, 2017; Kant, 1797/2017). Love should not be something that we can claim, because we find 'free' love particularly valuable, or so they argue. Being able to control emotions, such as love, is furthermore a fantasy, others object.¹⁵ Another objection turns on the idea that love is not responsive to reasons, and therefore is not able to serve as the object of an obligation (Frankfurt, 2009). Others object to the compatibility of motivations: doing something out of love for the beloved is not compatible with being motivated for the sake of duty (Stocker, 1977; Williams, 1981).

For the purposes of this paper, I will not commit to any particular conception of love and will remain neutral about its meaning.^{16 17} This paper seeks out conceptions of love which render the moral duty to love more plausible. The conceptions it focuses on are conceptions following from questions such as 'does love have reasons' or 'what is love's motivation', not so much on conceptions following from questions such as 'what is the object of the love' (e.g. parental or romantic love). The latter is irrelevant for discussing the four objections. For example, whether we have parental or romantic love in mind is irrelevant to the opposition between the reasons-for-love view and the no-reasons-for-love view.¹⁸ The question of whether there can be an obligation

¹⁵ Whether or not love involves emotions is a matter of controversy. For discussion, see e.g. Brogaard (2015) and Pismenny (2018).

¹⁶ This paper will remain neutral about the meaning of love as long as it is taken to mean more than 'showing the right kind of behaviour'. I take 'love' to refer to at least some kind of mental state, be it a sentiment, concern, perception, emotion, or other.

¹⁷ Throughout this paper I will solely talk about love for people. Not because I render love for other objects impossible, but because most authors in the discussed literature only talk about love for people, and this is sufficient to make my claim.

¹⁸ I follow Esther Kroeker's (2019) discussion of this debate, which includes among other things romantic love, love of parents for children, and friendship.

to love does not depend solely on the interpretation of love we have.

This paper will neither provide a positive defence of Liao's claim or other claims for a moral duty or obligation to love. The goal is solely to rebut the four objections and to show that, on particular conceptions of duties and particular conceptions of love, a duty or obligation to love may appear more plausible.¹⁹ Like many philosophers, including Frankfurt (1998), I will adopt the way of speaking that opposes love and duty as referring to the purported limits of the authority of morality.

First, I will argue that a moral obligation to love may appear more plausible on conceptions of moral obligations that are detached from the notion of making claims and demanding things from one another. In the second and third part of this paper I will argue respectively that conceptions of love that depict love as responsive to reasons, and emotions involved in love as commandable, also contribute to the plausibility of a moral obligation to love. Finally, I argue that conceptions of the motivation of moral duty as at least compatible with, or even constitutive of a motivation of love, also contribute to the possibility of a moral obligation to love.

A different conception of obligations

In *The Second-Person Standpoint*, Stephen Darwall argues that moral obligations are essentially interpersonal and presuppose mutual accountability (2009). This second-person standpoint is "the perspective you and I take up when we make and acknowledge claims on one another's conduct and will" (2009, p. 3). For example, standing in line for a food truck, you ask the woman next to you – who is unaware of her foot being on top of your toes – to remove herself from your foot. According to Darwall, moral claims are defined by their origin in another person's will. You are not informing the woman of something or calling her attention to some fact, but you are making a moral claim on the woman's conduct. Claims are understood by Darwall to be sources of a distinctive kind of reason for action, which Darwall refers

¹⁹ I am aware that there are technical differences between the concepts of 'duty' and 'obligation', however these differences are irrelevant for this particular paper. I will use 'duty' and 'obligation' somewhat interchangeably here, since I adopt the relevant word usage of major sources in the debate, such as Matthew Liao, Stephen Darwall, Harry Frankfurt, and Immanuel Kant.

to as second-personal. "What makes a reason second-personal is that it is grounded in (*de jure*) authority relations that an addresser takes to hold between him and his addressee" (2009, p. 4). These distinctive reasons are created by second-personal address, whereby a person with the relevant authority, e.g. you standing in line for a food truck, issues a demand to a specific addressee, the woman stepping on your toes. On the basis of such a Darwallian conception of moral obligations, an obligation to love becomes somewhat problematic. Darwall argues that love is "something we cannot earn but that can only be freely given" (2017). We want love to be freely offered to us, and we do not want a debt to return it. If love is something we want to be freely offered, love cannot be the object of a second-personal address, whereby someone issues a demand for love to a specific addressee. Unlike respect, Darwall argues, love cannot arise through acceptance of a claim for love. "Even if there could be a legitimate claim to love, the most that could arise through accepting the claim's legitimacy would be respect for someone's authority to make it and for them as having this authority" (2017, p. 99). For Liao, this would imply that children cannot lay claim to love, because love should be given freely, to children, too, and we therefore cannot have an obligation to love them.

However, on a different, non-Darwallian, conception of moral obligations, an obligation to love may appear more plausible. R. Jay Wallace takes issue with the idea that a claim or demand are the source of the obligation. Darwall refers to an example by David Hume (1751/2006) in which a person with a gouty toe protests that you should remove your foot from atop his inflamed and painful digit (2009, pp. 6-8). If we take seriously the idea that it is the addressing of a claim or demand that is the source of distinctively second-personal reasons, we would not have a second-personal reason to refrain from stepping on the victim's toe until the protest was issued. Surely this cannot be right, as R. Jay Wallace has pointed out (2007). We want to say that we have a reason not to step on someone's gouty toe, that is, (to some degree) prior to and independently of any complaint that might be issued after the toe has actually been stepped on. Such a conception of moral obligations also makes possible that we owe things to people who are not in the position to claim anything from us, like the severely disabled, future generations, or, relevant in Liao's case, small children. One's reason not to step on the gouty toe of one's neighbor seems

to obtain independently of whether the victim of the condition orders one not to tread on him. Moreover, it seems equally independent of whether the victim, or anyone else, is in fact disposed to respond to one's treading on his toes with accountability reactions (Wallace, 2007, p. 7).

R. Jay Wallace proposes an alternative to Darwall's voluntarist model to avoid the apparent disadvantage of the requirement that when (explicit or implicit) commands that one does X are absent, one cannot have second-personal reasons or obligations to do X. Wallace's alternative is to understand second-personal reasons in essentially relational terms (2007, 2019). On his approach, what makes a reason second-personal is not that it derives from the command of another person but that it is implicated in a structure of relational or 'bipolar normativity'.²⁰ This means that in the gouty toe example we might say that one's reason not to tread on the other person's foot is second-personal, insofar as it is connected with a series of characteristic assumptions about the normative relations one stands in to the other person. For Wallace, these normative relations are not limited to special relationships, like the ones we have with friends or family. Much like Darwall's second-personal reasons, Wallace's relational reasons are broader: we have normative relations with persons beyond these special relationships. All these persons have a right not to be harmed or made to suffer, which warrants a demand not to be treated in these ways. Wallace argues that one's obligation in this matter has a similarly relational aspect; it is an obligation to the gout victim *not to disregard his well-being*. Its violation would not merely be something that is impersonally wrong or incorrect, but an act that wrongs the person who is thus made to suffer (Wallace, 2007, p. 28). The second-personal reason for one to remove one's foot is not created by the protest of one's victim, but by the fact that stepping on someone's gouty toe is *wronging someone*.

Wallace allows us to speak of moral obligations without claims, but is still relying on the notion of second-personal reasons. Is any relation or interaction between people necessary to see that 'toe-stepping' is wrong? Isn't toe-stepping wrong independently of the normative relations we stand in to the other person? We could disregard second-personal reasons altogether. Besides, a second-personal reason to remove one's foot, Darwall

20 On bipolar normativity, see Michael Thompson (2004).

also introduces what he calls a “third-personal reason”: a ‘state-of-the-world-regarding reason’ for anyone to effect displacement of the foot, which is provided by the fact that the person whose toe is being stepped on is in pain (Darwall, 2007, 2009).²¹ Perhaps third-personal reasons suffice to determine our duties. As Gopal Sreenivasan has argued, the relational aspect is not necessary on a different account of duties or obligations. Sreenivasan draws a distinction between directed and non-directed duties: a duty is a *directed duty* if there is someone to whom it is owed; it is a *non-directed duty* if there is no one to whom it is owed (Sreenivasan, 2010, p. 467). Sreenivasan compares it to Judith Jarvis Thomson’s distinction between ‘duty’ and ‘ought’ (Thomson, 1990). By ‘ought’ Thomson means what morality requires someone, all things considered (ATC), to do. By ‘duty’ she means that which can be claimed by one person from another. There is similarity here between Thomson’s ought ATC and Sreenivasan’s non-directed duty, and between Thomson’s duty and Sreenivasan’s directed duty. Although someone’s claim-right against one will often coincide with what one ought ATC to do, these are two distinctive kinds of obligations. We do not need a relational reason for an obligation to come into place. Sreenivasan distinguishes directed from non-directed duties, but both are grounded in non-relational, objective facts. To return to the gouty toe example, if the victim claims you desist, you have a directed duty to remove your foot. Independently of this directed duty, you have a non-directed duty: after balancing all moral considerations and interests, you ought ATC to remove your foot.

Both Wallace and Sreenivasan show conceptions of moral obligations that are detached from the notion of making claims and demanding things from one another. If we accept that love should be freely given, both Wallace and Sreenivasan could argue for a moral obligation to love children without the child making a moral claim on our conduct. Wallace could argue that we are obliged to love a child, because we are obliged not to disregard their

²¹ In *The Second-Person Standpoint* (2009) Darwall writes that it is possible that there are different kinds of reasons for action involved in the gouty toe case. In his ‘Reply To Korsgaard, Wallace and Watson’ (2007), Darwall elaborates on that statement by saying that he meant to say that there are two different kinds of reason, one consisting in the fact that you are in pain and that this is bad for you (and a bad thing agent neutrally), and the other consisting in the fact that you warrantedly demand that the agent not be on your foot (2007, p. 60).

wellbeing; not loving the child would wrong the child. But such a relational aspect is not even necessary here, since Sreenivasan shows us that we can have a non-directed duty that is not owed to anyone. We could have a moral obligation to love children, not because we owe this to the particular child, but because after balancing all moral considerations and interests, this is what we – all things considered – ought to do.

Reasons for love

A different objection to a moral obligation to love comes from Harry Frankfurt, who famously argued that love is not a response to reasons but is in fact the basis of all reasons (2009). On this account, an obligation to love is impossible: we cannot have an obligation that is not reason-responsive.²² Frankfurt argues that love is not a response to the value of the beloved but rather a bestowal of value on them: we love someone and through our love that person becomes valuable. Other philosophers, for example Nick Zangwill (2013) and Aaron Smuts (2013), have defended similar positions. Although these positions differ in detail and argument, they have in common the claim that love is not a response to reasons.

The first and most common objection to this view is that it makes love unintelligible. Why do we feel we have reasons to love the particular person we love? If there is nothing about the particular person we love that could be a reason for our love, there would be no reason for us to love this person rather than anyone else (Velleman, 1999; Stump, 2006; Shpall, 2020). This seems quite counterintuitive. Eleonore Stump writes, if there is no reason for love, then “it seems as if the lover could just as easily have loved some other person. Since there is nothing about the particular person he loves which is the reason for his love, there is also no reason why he should love her rather than anyone else” (Stump, 2006, p. 2). Loving particular persons seems to require loving for reasons tied to the beloved.

²² That something must be responsive to reasons to be the object of an obligation is a claim held by Harry Frankfurt (2009) among others. However, there are a few philosophers who take up the position that love can be an object of an obligation while not being responsive to reasons. Nick Zangwill (2013), for example, claims that a lack of parental love can be a moral flaw while not being a rational flaw. He claims love can be assessable as more or less appropriate without being more or less rational (2013, p. 310).

Another objection comes from Niko Kolodny (2003): Frankfurt's view fails to show why some kinds of love strike us as appropriate and others as inappropriate. From the first-person perspective of someone who loves, the constitutive emotions and motivations of love make reflexive sense, argues Kolodny (2003, p. 137). Love seems appropriate to the person who experiences it. Furthermore, from the third-person perspective of an adviser or critic, we often find love or its absence inappropriate: "Consider our reactions to the wife who loves her abusive and uncaring husband, or to the parent who is emotionally indifferent to her child" (2003, p. 137). Even if we hold a conception of love as involuntary, as Kolodny does, it does not follow that there cannot be normative reasons for love, that love cannot be assessed as appropriate or inappropriate to its object (2003, p. 138). Frankfurt's view does not distinguish between love of things that are unworthy and love of things that are worthy of our love (Baier, 1982; Wolf, 2002). Some things seem to be valuable or to lack value, independently of whether or not we love them. Love sometimes seems inappropriate to us, and the appropriateness of love seems to be a response to such independent values.

While the previous objection to the obligation to love was countered by looking at a different conception of obligations, objections like Frankfurt's could be countered by looking at our conception of love. Several philosophers argue that love *is* a response to reasons. David Velleman (1999), for example, famously argues that love is a moral emotion and a response to the dignity of the beloved. He claims that love is an attitude of appreciation: an awareness of the incomparable value in a person as a rational being, who can be actuated by reasons and appreciate ends. In Liao's case, this means that we have a reason to love children by responding to their dignity. But children (at least until a certain age) cannot be considered to be fully rational beings, actuated by reasons and appreciating ends. One could argue for a potentiality account: children have the potential to become rational beings, and therefore we can respond to their dignity providing a reason for love. But unless we take up the potentiality perspective, Velleman's conception of love, although a reason-responsive account, does not work for the duty to love that Liao is arguing for.

Another conception of love is the quality view, which claims that what justifies our love are the *qualities* or *properties* we value in the object of our love

(see e.g. Brogaard, 2015; Keller, 2000). Simon Keller, for instance, argues that attractive or desirable qualities are those the lover values in anyone; and my love for my beloved is justified by the beloved having these properties (2000). The biggest objection to a quality view like Keller's is that if we love for qualities, we would trade our beloveds for people who possess these qualities to an even greater degree (the fungibility or tradability problem). This consequence seems counterintuitive to what we think love is. Love does not seem to be transferable to someone else with the same characteristics, even to one who 'scores' higher for these characteristics (Nozick, 1974).

Due to this and similar critiques, quality views have had to refine their position in order not to fall prey to problems, such as: 'if I love a particular person B for value V, I should love everyone who has value V' (the promiscuity problem), or 'if my beloved B no longer possesses this value V, I should stop loving her' (the inconstancy problem). Another worry is that if reasons are universal, and if my love for B is a response to those reasons, then everyone is justified, or even obligated to love B (the universality problem).²³ These supposed consequences seem all quite counterintuitive to what we think love is and does.

Besides these general problems, the quality view might seem counterintuitive, especially for parental love: parents often claim to love their children unconditionally, or in general that could be considered an ideal worth pursuing. We consider it constitutive of romantic love that we choose our romantic partners on the basis of what properties we find attractive, explaining why we love this person rather than anyone else. In parental love however, the aspect of choice for a particular person with particular properties seems irrelevant, because we cannot choose the people that become our children. Once we have children we could of course compare their qualities, but that seems more irrelevant to parental love than it is to, for example, romantic love. Even if we would consider it appropriate that people have 'a favourite child' because of particular properties this child has, this does not mean that they do not love their other children. Qualities might be less relevant as a reason for love in parent-child relationships than they are in romantic or friendship relationships. However, since Keller's proposal the quality view has come a long way. Shpall argues convincingly that some

²³ Distinction and names of these four problems are derived from Troy Jollimore's *Love's Vision* (2011).

of these arguments are fallacious (2020). They paint a naïve, or perhaps outdated, picture of the quality view. These objections should rather be seen as a way to refine the quality view as to reject it completely.

To avoid comparing qualities and the aforementioned problems, one could argue that one's reason for loving a person is one's relationship to them: the ongoing history of shared concern and activity between individuals (Kolodny, 2003).²⁴ One could argue that the parent-child relationship is valuable and renders love appropriate. The absence of love would then be inappropriate because there is a relationship that calls for it. This view holds that lovers view relationships as reasons for valuing both the relationship and the person with whom one has the relationship. Several philosophers have argued for a combination of the quality and relationship view. Thomas Hurka argues they are often intertwined: when we share a valuable history with a person, we come to admire qualities because they belong to someone with whom we share this history (2017). Conversely, we feel more attached by a history if it involves someone whose qualities we admire (Hurka, 2017, p. 168). This is similar to an argument from Troy Jollimore who argues that love is justified by the valuable qualities of the beloved which are only valued as a result of the love relationship (2017). When we ask a father why he loves his child he might just say 'because she is my daughter', revealing that the relationship they share is a reason for their love. Sharing this valuable relation with the child, the qualities of the child also become valued by the father. Thus, several kinds of reasons for love can become intertwined.

If one accepts that love is reason-responsive, one could then argue that, because we have reasons to love such as a person's qualities or the history we share with them, we should love particular people because of these particular qualities or relationships. I do not intend to argue for such a claim, but only to expose its possibility.

What this debate seems to ignore is that we could not only have a reason to love 'person X', we could independently have a reason to love (period). Focusing on why we love and what love is in general, enables us to look at what we find meaningful in love and loving, instead of what we find valuable in the beloved. Although arguing for an obligation or moral duty to love seems

²⁴ I follow Esther Kroeker's (2019) classification of recent accounts of the relationship between love and practical reasons, which classifies Kolodny as a reasons-for-love-view.

to be unpopular in contemporary analytic philosophy, such a duty is not a novel idea. For example, a commandment to 'love thy neighbour' has a central place in almost every religion. Throughout philosophical, spiritual or religious traditions loving is often seen as a virtue: a loving person is more virtuous than an indifferent person. Could contemporary philosophy make room for an ethical reason to love, regardless of the beloved? Iris Murdoch lays out such a moral framework in which love is the centre of morality (SOG). She argues that loving teaches us how to be better people. Focusing on the reason for *loving* instead of focusing on the particularities of beloved 'X', might make arguing for a moral obligation to love a whole lot easier. Focusing on the *lover* instead of the beloved could furthermore improve the way we love in general, improving our relationships with all those particular X's. It could help us categorize better and worse forms of loving.

The objection to an obligation to love is that we cannot have an obligation to love because love is not responsive to reasons. However, it is not at all decided that love is not responsive to reasons. If love is responsive to reasons, the duty to love becomes more plausible. Furthermore, we do not have to focus on accounts of 'reasons to love X' and their accompanying criticisms. Focusing on 'reasons to love, period' might give us possibilities in arguing for a duty to love.

Controlling emotions

A third argument against the possibility of a moral obligation to love is the commandability objection. It is generally accepted, after the Kantian point of 'ought implies can' that to have a duty to do something, the action must be commandable. One must be able to bring about the action with success or, as some would say, at will. Love, so this argument goes, is not commandable, because it is an emotion, and emotions are not commandable. Therefore, there cannot be a duty to love. Immanuel Kant writes "love is a matter of feeling, not of willing, and I cannot love because I will to, still less because I ought to (I cannot be constrained to love); so a duty to love is an absurdity" (Kant, 1797/2017, p. 172). Similarly, Richard Taylor argues that "love and compassion are passions, not actions, are therefore subject to no terms of duties or moral obligations... Love, as a feeling, cannot be commanded, even by God, simply because it is not up to anyone at any given moment how he feels about his neighbour or anything else" (Taylor, 1970, pp. 252-253).

There are three controversial key concepts at play: emotion, love, and duty. There are opposing conceptualizations for all of them. The controversy around duty and obligations was covered in the first section of this paper. In connection to Kant's objection, one should bear in mind fundamentally different conceptualizations of the nature of love and emotion. His objection would work only if we thought of love as an emotion and viewed emotions as physiological uncontrollable conditions. Again, a different conception of love could do the trick. Love is not a bodily feeling like hunger. There is an explanatory but never a justificatory reason for why someone is hungry. According to reason-based accounts there are reasons for love, because love is not like hunger. Love is not an urge or a drive, and hence this cannot be an argument to support that we cannot have an obligation to love. We can have reasons for love in a way that we cannot have for a sensation like hunger. At most we can *explain* why we are hungry, and this explanation is one of physiological causation. Furthermore, love distinguishes from hunger because we can talk about it in terms of loving better or worse: while we cannot be better or worse in being hungry, we can try to be better at loving.

What about the view that love is not a sensation, but an emotion? Would that still render love unfit to be object of an obligation? Whatever conception of love we choose, love does at least *involve* emotions (Brogard, 2015). Love without emotions would be a cold and undesirable phenomenon. If love involves emotions, does that pose a threat to the duty or moral obligation to love? Liao thinks it does not, because there are plausible conceptions of emotions according to which they are controllable (2015). He argues that we can bring about this emotional component of love by several methods: 1) internal control, 2) external control, and 3) cultivation. Internal control means that we motivate ourselves to have certain emotions by using reasons: a) we can give ourselves reasons to have particular emotions and b) we can reflect on reasons why we have particular emotions in particular circumstances or towards particular persons (2015, p. 106). By appealing to these reasons and reflecting on them, we might begin to view people differently. In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Iris Murdoch gives an example where a mother-in-law (M) feels contempt for her daughter-in-law (D). M decides to reflect on the reasons why she feels contempt for D, and realizes that her reason is that she is jealous that D will threaten M's relationship with her son. After critical self-reflection, she decides that her feelings of contempt for D are not supported

by good reasons. Through reflecting on the reasons why she feels a certain way toward D and deciding that her emotions are not well-supported, M makes way for developing affection for D.

Liao's second method for bringing about particular emotions is one of external control: deliberately placing ourselves in situations in which we know that we would probably experience particular emotions (2015, p. 108). For example, if we know that we tend to feel compassion when we see homeless people, then we have a reasonable chance of feeling compassion if we deliberately visit a homeless shelter.

A third method is to cultivate our emotions, for which Liao names several strategies (2015, p. 108). One strategy for cultivating our emotions is to behave *as if* we have particular emotions. Liao argues that by doing so, we cultivate our emotional capacities such that we would be more likely to have particular emotions in appropriate circumstances. Through engaging in these forms of behaviour repeatedly over time, and cultivating the capacity for an emotion, it is likely that we increase that particular emotional response in the future. Other strategies for cultivating particular emotions are repeatedly using the methods of internal and external control.

Finally, cultivating does not merely involve a repetition of internal and external control over time, but also deep reflection on the reasons why we tend to have particular emotions and whether we have good reasons for continuing or not continuing to have these emotions. In the case of parental love, we could reflect on the reasons why we tend to feel a certain way toward a particular child. Moreover, we can successfully bring about the emotional aspect of love for a child through external control by deliberately placing ourselves in situations in which we would have a good chance of feeling affection and warmth toward the child. Finally, we can cultivate loving emotions for a child through behavioural inducement: we might try to act affectionately and warmly towards a child, even if we do not initially feel that way. In the case of parental love, by repeatedly acting as if, there is a reasonable chance that we cultivate the capacity for feeling affection and warmth for the child.

It may be argued that at best there is a duty to *try* to love, but not a duty to love, since success of bringing about emotions is not guaranteed. Even if we try to love, we cannot directly control whether or not we succeed. But since ought implies can, one might argue that we cannot have a duty to

love, because we cannot guarantee love. However, this is a wrong depiction of what it means to have a duty. The ought-implies-can requirement does not exclude the possibility that someone has a duty while not fulfilling it. Moreover, the requirement leaves room for conditions that do not annul the duty, but the blameworthiness for failing to meet the duty. In other words, we can have valid excuses for not fulfilling our duty: a cook has a duty to provide guests with good food but should not be blamed when the waiter secretly poisons it.²⁵ Similarly, we can have a duty to love, even when we do not have direct control over whether we succeed. A mother with postnatal depression who is trying to love her child, but who does not succeed because of her mental illness, does not fulfil her duty (which is a duty to love, not a duty to try to love), but she is also not blameworthy because she has a valid excuse.

But this last example is not very satisfying. It relies on a conception of love in which we do not attribute love to the depressed mother. Now some would say that indeed a mother who suffers from postnatal depression cannot love her child. But is it really incoherent to conceive of someone who is too depressed to make loving gestures or expressions, but who would still say of themselves that they love their children or spouses? Can we make room for a conception of love in which someone does not perform loving actions, but who still loves or continues to love? Arguing that there is at best a moral obligation to *try* to love but not to love does not only depend on a particular conception of duty, it also depends on a particular conception of love. It seems to depend on a behaviourist view of love, a view of love in which there must be some sort of *expression of love* to count as love. Some philosophers argue, for example, that when someone is unable to have sex or to care about the feelings of the other person (e.g., in depression), then they do not longer love the other (Earp & Savulescu, 2020, p. 60, see however Naar, 2017). On a different conception of love however, we can make room for someone who continues not to perform loving actions, but who still continues to love. We could view love as a *practice* that can happen in the inner life: it does not need to be something that is measured by expressions, e.g. verbal expression of feelings or sex (Spreeuwenberg, 2021; Spreeuwenberg & Schaubroeck, 2020). Iris Murdoch argues for love as focused attention (SOG). Looking, attending and focusing our direction all takes place in the *inner life*. The example of

M and D shows that the practice of loving is something that takes place in M's mind. Instead of expressing a feeling that 'overcame her', M reflects and looks at D, carefully attends to D. She is trying to see D in a way that goes beyond her own projections and her initial assumptions, a way that is not guided by her ego. Loving in this sense is shifting our focus, a practice of transcending the self, but it is not measured by proof of expression. Love then is not a practice that can fail or succeed, since engaging in this practice is *what loving is*. On such a conception of love, an obligation to love might be more plausible: we would be obliged to engage in loving practice.

The motivation for love

Some theories put love at the centre of a well-lived life and present duty as a lesser, or even morally deficient, motivation (Grenberg, 2014, p. 210). They argue that duty is that upon which we act when we do not have enough – or the right kind – of love, that is, when we don't have enough – or the right – positive attraction toward ourselves, other persons or issues of concern outside of ourselves. This brings up an interesting point of whether love and duty are at all compatible. This fourth objection for a duty to love consists in arguing that love and duty are incompatible, because its *motivations* are incompatible.

This objection focuses on one's motivations to act lovingly. Our motivations in love are focused on the beloved: out of love we act for the beloved's sake. We buy them flowers, cook them dinner, or, following somewhat grittier but famous examples, visit them in the hospital (Stocker, 1977) or rescue them when they are drowning (Williams, 1981). If one had a duty to love, it follows that one could fulfil this duty by loving someone out of duty. Yet, loving a person out of duty rather than for the person's own sake, does not seem equivalent to really loving a person. Following this line of thought, duty has no place in love, and love has no place in the world of moral obligations.

This objection from motivation is rooted in criticism of Kant's moral theory. Kant argues that an action has moral worth only if it is done for the sake of duty (1797/2017). Critics of Kant argue that at least in personal relationships, we should act out of a direct concern for others, but a Kantian agent cannot do this, because he is acting out of a concern for a moral

²⁵ This example is a variation of an example given by Liao (2015, p. 115).

principle. In Michael Stocker's (1977) example, Smith is visiting you in the hospital and alleges that he is your friend. You are thankful for his visit, but when you express your gratitude, Smith tells you that he came to visit you because he thought it was his duty, not essentially because you are friends (1977). Stocker argues that Smith is not really a friend, because Smith appears to be motivated to visit you for the sake of some impartial rule but not for *your* sake. Smith is doing the right thing, but for the wrong reason. Bernard Williams (1981) famously makes a similar point with his example of the drowning wife and the rescuing husband having 'one thought too many' when he considers whom to save among the two people drowning: one being his wife and the other being a stranger (Williams, 1981, p. 18). Similarly, looking at Liao's argument, a child who discovers that his parents love him out of a sense of duty might feel that they do not really love him.

What to make of this objection? There are three ideas at play, of which only the third is controversial. First, we should do the right thing with the right motivation; a right action that is done for the wrong reason has less moral worth than an action done for the right reason. Second, in personal relationships, we should be motivated to do things for the other person's sake. We would not be motivated to do something for the other person's sake if we were motivated to perform the action out of self-interest. The third idea with which Liao takes issue is that in personal relationships, when we are motivated to do our duty for duty's sake, it inevitably undermines the relationship, because as with being motivated to do things out of self-interest, we would not be motivated to do things for the other person's sake. This idea presupposes that being motivated to do the right thing for the sake of duty and being motivated to do something for the other person's sake are incompatible motivations (2015). However, Liao argues that we can be motivated to do something for the sake of moral duty, and, *at the same time*, for the person's sake (2015, p. 126). In Stocker's example, Smith could have been motivated to see you both for the sake of duty and because he wants to see you. The two motives need not always be distinct, argues Liao: "The content of the duty is just to be motivated for the other person's sake" (2015, p. 126). We can specify the content of the duty as partial: Smith would have a duty to be motivated for your sake to visit you in the hospital.

One might respond that in personal relationships, a person should only have one motive for action, the motive to do things for the other person's sake.

One might even go further and say that it is wrong to have any other motive but the motive to do things for the other person's sake: that is the upshot of Williams' one thought too many' objection against impartial justifications for helping one's beloved. Brook Sadler takes up the opposite stand and argues not just that the motives are compatible, but that modern moral notions of respect, duty and obligation help us to determine how to act out of concern for the particular person who is the friend or beloved (2006). She argues that in considering and choosing how to act with regard to my friend, I open myself to moral deliberation or more broadly, to practical reasoning. Despite the fact that we sometimes act toward our friends and loved ones in ways that appear unmediated by moral deliberation, it is nonetheless true that moral considerations ultimately constitute a large part of our conceptions of love and friendship and even our motives for action. If we were shown that acting a certain habitual way toward a friend was morally indefensible, we would no longer see that as what friendship requires.

If our actions are motivated by an appeal to duty, or obligation, or a concern for doing the right thing, we do not have one thought too many; rather, we have mustered up the strength of will to fulfil a duty. And it is the fact that one has been morally steadfast that reveals the genuineness of one's love or friendship. One should be admired for adhering to one's commitment to the other. (2006, p. 235)

Sadler argues that Stocker's complaint against modern ethical theories does not seem so cutting. Notions of duty, obligation, or rightness taken as motives, are not only consistent or compatible with relationships of love and friendship, but can be seen to be *constitutive* of them, she argues. Moral obligations can aid us in determining what it is that we are to do with respect to the other; comprise our commitment to the friend or beloved; and help us to fulfil that commitment. Sadler argues that 'I did X because I love you' does not necessarily differ from 'I did X because it is the right thing to do'. If Smith is a good friend, it is because he has been attentive to the fact that your illness in the hospital is an occasion on which he ought to uphold his commitment to you. In Liao's case, if one is a loving parent, it could be because one has been attentive to the fact that the position of the child and one's relationship with it is an occasion on which one ought to love the child.

The child who is disturbed upon hearing that his parents love him out of moral duty would make a mistake if he inferred that the parents do not truly love him: being motivated to act for duty's sake is *constitutive* of the parents being concerned for the child's sake, argues Sadler.

The answers offered above all reject the motivation objection within a Kantian perspective. Another possibility comes up in rejecting the Kantian perspective altogether and rejecting the idea that an action has moral worth only if it is done for the sake of duty. In that case we do not have to act *out of a sense of duty* but just have to act *in accordance with the duty*. Solely being motivated for the other person's sake could then have moral worth on its own. While Kantians deem impartiality most important, Murdoch (IP, SGC, SOG) argues that the route to become a morally better person is precisely via the particular. Murdoch would probably agree with Liao's claim that we can be morally motivated and, at the same time, for the sake of the other, like Sadler does, but she takes the opposite route to Sadler's towards being both a better person and lover. While Sadler argues that notions of duty, obligation, or rightness taken as motives make us better lovers, Murdoch argues the other way around: loving is what makes us morally better people. She places love at the centre of morality and considers love a virtue. In her view of love and morality there is no incompatibility between claiming that one's motivation for doing 'X' was love, or claiming that one's motivation for 'X' was moral insight. In this sense Murdoch argues that love is constitutive of being a good person, which is the opposite of the route Sadler takes, who starts with being motivated to be a good person and ends up with being a good lover.

These routes do not have to be incompatible, though: Murdoch would not object to the claim taking up moral responsibilities can make us better lovers. While believing that moral responsibilities make us better lovers, we could at the same time accept that engaging in the practice of loving attention makes us better people. In some kind of circular motion moral motivation and loving practice could positively influence each other, building upon each other. Smith knows that you being in the hospital is an occasion on which he ought to uphold his commitment to you, and this causes his attentiveness, which is Sadler's argument. At the same time, Smith can become aware of his moral responsibilities and becomes a morally better person precisely because of being attentive to you, which is Murdoch's argument.

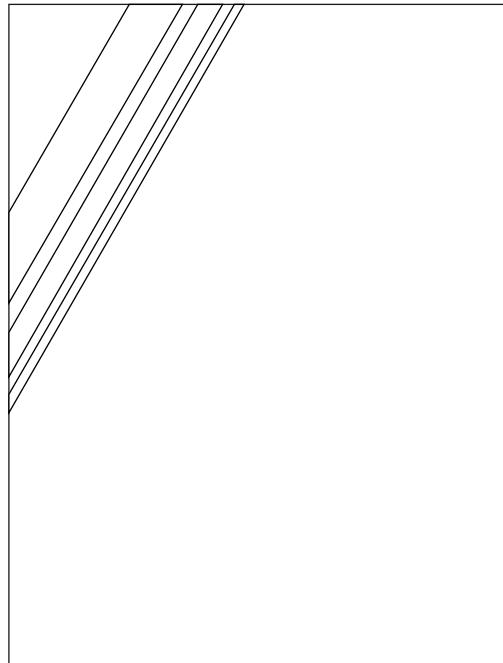
Both Sadler's and Murdoch's position, as well as a hybrid position of these two intertwined, do away with the motivation objection for a moral duty to love. Here, again, with different conceptions of both love and morality, a moral obligation to love appears more plausible.

Conclusion

The four objections that have been raised against a moral obligation to love have been rejected by looking at different conceptions of obligations and different conceptions of love. On conceptions of moral obligations that are detached from the notion of making claims and demanding things from one another, a moral obligation to love may appear more plausible. Conceptions of love that depict love as responsive to reasons, and emotions involved in love as commandable, also contribute to the plausibility of a moral obligation to love. Finally, conceptions of the motivation from moral duty as at least compatible with, or even constitutive of a motivation from love, also contribute to the possibility of a moral obligation to love. Similarly, conceptions of love as constitutive of moral practice contribute to this possibility, taking a different route. Now that the obstacles have been removed and an obligation to love seems at least possible, one could take up the task of arguing whether we *have* such an obligation.

2.

‘Love’ as a Practice: Looking at Real People



An ameliorative project

Recent philosophical discussions about love often focus on reasons to love a particular person. Some philosophers argue that we do not have reasons to love (Frankfurt, 2009; Smuts, 2013; Zangwill, 2013), but rather that our love for that particular person *gives* us reasons. Harry Frankfurt argues that what we love is important to us just because we love it. Others argue that we do have reasons to love the particular people we love, but disagree on what these reasons consist in. For example, the reason for love is the properties of the object of our love (Abrahamson and Leite, 2011; Jollimore, 2011; Keller, 2000), such as being funny, or having beautiful eyes, or our relationship with this person (Kolodny, 2003).

In these recent discussions philosophers of love seem to primarily focus on ‘reasons to love person X’. But what about ‘reasons to love, period’? Focusing on why we love and what love is in general, enables us to look at what we find *meaningful in love*, instead of what we find *valuable in the beloved*. Focusing on the lover instead of the beloved could improve the way we love in general, improving our relationships with all those particular X’s. Focusing on the loving agent could help answer questions such as: ‘what does it mean to love?’ and ‘how can we love better?’.

Apart from describing what love is, one could independently argue about what kind of love would be more or less valuable. We could categorize better and worse forms of love. In this chapter this normative dimension of the concept ‘love’ is considered. Such a project is not trying to formulate *the* description of ‘love’, but is focusing on what would be better or worse forms of loving. Furthermore, this chapter is what Sally Haslanger has called an ‘ameliorative’ project (Haslanger, 2012). Such a project involves trying to formulate a concept that best suits the point of having such a term. What is the purpose of talking about love? An ameliorative project requires actively making decisions about what to mean when using it. How can we change the world around us for the better and improve how we use the concept ‘love’? In this sense, ameliorative projects can be important for social progress. What use of the word ‘love’ could improve the way we love and how could it impact society? ‘All about love’ by bell hooks is such an ameliorative project about love (2001). Using personal anecdotes, psychological and philosophical ideas, she criticizes the way in which ‘love’ is used in today’s society – which

Abstract: This paper is engaged in what Sally Haslanger has called an ameliorative project (2000, 2006). What do we want love to mean? We might wonder whether we can improve the way we use the concept. Can we choose a conception of love that makes us better lovers? By comparing David Velleman’s (1999) and Iris Murdoch’s account of love (SOG) this paper argues that Velleman’s account is not suitable for the ameliorative project, while Murdoch’s account enables us to be better lovers. It argues that better love consists of an *activity* of loving, instead of a *passive* evaluation. It is furthermore a specific activity: loving means engaging in an ongoing practice of loving attention, a process that requires continuous work. This paper aims to show that Murdochian love is not only valuable for philosophers or people who are concerned with being morally good – which is Murdoch’s focus – but is particularly valuable to ordinary lovers, to people who want meaningful loving relationships.

In this dissertation this article is referred to as ‘LP2’.

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is, according to her, ‘without much meaning’, for example when referring to how much we like our favorite food, color or sports – and instead argues that if we all came to the agreement that ‘love’ is a verb rather than a noun, then we would all be happier (hooks 2001, p. 4). hooks believes love is more of an interactive process, and clarifies why society needs to adopt this use of the word love.

What should this particular ‘verb’ consist in? In line with hooks I argue that we would all love better if we think of love as a verb: love as an activity of attending to one another. Love as an ongoing practice, a process. I turn to two famous analytic philosophers, who have argued for different but related accounts of love. By comparing David Velleman’s and Iris Murdoch’s account of love I argue that Velleman’s account is not suitable for the ameliorative project while Murdoch’s account enables us to be better lovers. I argue that better love consists of an *activity* of loving, instead of a *passive evaluation*. While love can be understood in many ways, at least one aspect of it is captured in the slogan: ‘love’ is a verb. This slogan captures the idea that loving is an activity and furthermore a specific activity: loving means engaging in an *ongoing practice of loving attention*, a process that requires continuous work. I will argue that Murdochian love is not only valuable for philosophers or people who are concerned with being morally good – which is Murdoch’s focus – and that Murdochian love is particularly valuable to ordinary lovers, to people who want meaningful loving relationships.

Love, value and looking

In ‘Love as a Moral Emotion’, Velleman attempts to assemble elements of both Murdoch and Kant into an account of love as a moral emotion (Velleman, 1999). This famous contemporary account of love is meant to address and combat Frankfurt’s position: love is not a response to reasons but is in fact the basis of all reasons. On Frankfurt’s account, the lover cares for the beloved, desires their well-being, and, in doing so, comes to confer value upon the beloved. Against this bestowal view of love, Velleman argues for the appraisal view of love inspired by Iris Murdoch. Murdoch, Kant and Velleman all allow that value may be discerned or figuratively seen, as Tony Milligan has observed in his analysis of Velleman’s use of Murdoch’s account of love (2013, p. 113). Velleman adopts Murdoch’s idea that this

value may be seen by *really looking* (Velleman, 1999, p. 343).

Murdoch’s account of love and Kant’s account of respect are taken by Velleman to be complementary ways in which we recognize the inherent value of persons. Velleman takes different features from both philosopher’s work, and is not alone in placing Murdoch’s ideas within a Kantian perspective.²⁶

Velleman, being a Kantian, argues that our value, our dignity as persons, consists in our rational nature. One important way in which we exercise our rational nature is to respond with respect to the dignity of other persons. We are aware of the incomparable value in a person as a rational being and this awareness arrests our motives of self-interest, and thereby prevents us from treating him as a means to our ends. This is what Velleman (and Kantians in general) call *respect*. Velleman argues that love is similarly a response to the dignity of persons, and as such it is the dignity of the object that justifies love. Velleman suggests that love, like respect, is an appreciation for the capacity to be “actuated by reasons” (p. 365), which means a capacity for “appreciating the value of ends, including self-existent ends such as persons”. Velleman argues: “I find it plausible to say that what we respond to, in loving people, is their capacity to love” (p. 365).

For Velleman, love and respect are responses to the same value, but they are different kinds of responses. Love arrests not our self-love, like respect does, but rather our emotional self-protection. Love disarms our emotional defences, making us vulnerable, by responding to someone’s dignity (p. 361). Velleman claims that:

Many of our defenses against being emotionally affected by another person are ways of not seeing what is most affecting about him. This contrived blindness to the other person is among the defenses that are lifted by love, with the result that we really look at him, perhaps for the first time, and respond emotionally in a way that’s indicative of having really seen him. (1999, p. 361).

26 Although Murdoch regarded herself a Platonist, many philosophers have argued that her ideas are compatible with Kantian ideas, or have used her ideas within Kantian perspectives (e.g. Bagnoli 2003; Grenberg 2014; Merritt 2017; and Milligan 2013).

There is a clear parallel with Murdoch here. Velleman's view of love as arresting our self-protective egocentricity helps to explain why love is an exercise in *really looking*, precisely as Murdoch claims. Velleman describes someone having "stopped loving his wife" as having "stopped really looking or listening" (p. 373). His account is clearly inspired by Murdoch, who claims that to love is to redirect our attention outside ourselves, to learn to perceive the truth about the world and seeing what there is outside oneself (SOG) and that love is an opening up in the sense that it is "the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real" (S&G, E&M, p. 215).

So Velleman's account of love seems to be broadly Murdochian, but by combining Murdoch's and Kant's theories he has worked himself into an awkward position. His account of love is detached in a way that Murdoch's is not.²⁷ It involves a certain abstraction of people, that Murdoch specifically avoids. While Murdoch argues that we should look at the *unique* and *particular* (SOG), Velleman's account tells us that what we love is essentially a person's dignity, something that all rational beings share. On Velleman's account, this is sufficient to speak of love.

The detachedness of Velleman's account of love becomes especially clear when he explains his notion of 'selectivity'. Since for Velleman love and respect are different rational responses to the same value, he should have an explanation for why the number of people we respect generally outweighs the number of people we love. Velleman is fully aware of this problem and argues that we cannot respond with love to the dignity of every person we meet, nor are we required to. For Velleman, love is the optional maximal response to others' dignity, while respect is the required minimum. Hence he argues for the *selectivity* of love. With this concept Velleman tries to account for personal, but not partial, love. Selectivity of love means that a contingent fit takes place between the way some people behaviorally express their dignity as persons and the way we happen to respond to those expressions by becoming emotionally vulnerable to them. The right sort of fit makes someone lovable by us (1999, p. 372) and our responding with love is a matter of our 'really seeing' the other in a way that we fail to do with others who do not fit us this way. It is important to note that by 'lovable' Velleman does not mean 'worthy of love'. Instead, he means something like 'able to be loved'.

²⁷ Possibly Kant's account of love is also not as detached as Velleman's (Milligan 2013).

Whether someone is lovable depends on how well his value as a person is expressed or symbolized for us by his empirical persona. Someone's persona may not speak very clearly of his value as a person, or may not speak in ways that are clear to us. (1999, p. 372)

Velleman's point is that we have many reasons for being selective in love, without having to find differences of worth among possible love objects. The people whom we do not happen to love may be just as eligible for love as our own children, spouses, parents, and intimate friends, he argues. "In merely respecting rather than loving these people, we do not assess them as lower in value. Rather, we feel one emotion rather than another in appreciation of their value. Loving some but not others entails valuing them differently but not attributing different values to them, or even comparing them at all" (1999, p. 372).

This explanation of love generates a few problems. Firstly, it seems to be an unrealistic illustration of what love is, for it puts little responsibility on the lover. It might be true that recognizing another's dignity can take some effort: we have to at least be willing to disarm our emotional defences in order for this to happen. However, let's keep the ameliorative project in mind. Taking love to be something so detached that we merely have to recognize the dignity of a person, and so contingent that we have little responsibility concerning whom we love and connect with, will not make us better lovers – or so I will argue in the following sections. Other uses of the word 'love' are better suited to improve the way we love, and to enable societal change. We should play a bigger part in loving each other. Velleman puts too much emphasis on both the contingent fit – and this being dependent on the way other people behaviorally express themselves – and the response to a value that all human beings share. We would be better lovers when love is more than contingent: love requires *actively* looking, engaging in an *ongoing practice*. Furthermore, loving goes beyond seeing someone's dignity; we are not finished with practicing love once we have recognized a value that all human beings share.

Velleman's piece has been extensively discussed, and other problems have been addressed by for example Edward Harcourt (2009) or Elijah Millgram (2004). I will shortly address a solution to one of these previously stated problems, because it unintentionally reveals the need for an account

of love as a more active engagement, seeing the particularities of our beloveds. One problem is that Velleman cannot explain love's personal character: if love is justified by a property that all rational people share, it seems to follow that it cannot matter which rational being one loves, and this seems contrary to another expectation we have about love; that it involves focus on the particularity of the loved individual (Lopez-Cantero, ms.). By reformulating Velleman's account of love, Pilar Lopez-Cantero accounts for the personal character of love by 1) explaining Velleman's selectivity as narrative fit and 2) re-formulating what is understood as 'rational nature' and 'empirical persona'. Although this reinterpretation describes love in a way that is, like Velleman's, a contingent, somewhat passive, emotion, it is useful for the ameliorative project here. Lopez-Cantero's reformulation of Velleman's account could be used as a clear example of why we need an account of love as an activity. She argues that it is our narrative, and not, as Velleman argues, our empirical persona, that fits with some and not with others. Lopez-Cantero suggests that the incomparable value of another is directly perceived through their personal narrative, which is a direct product of the agent: the narrator. The concepts 'narrator' and 'personal narrative' play an equivalent role in Lopez-Cantero's theory to 'rational nature' and 'empirical persona' in Velleman's. Since the lover has her own narrative agency which aims at intelligibility, some narratives will be particularly meaningful to her and in that case there will be a narrative fit with the beloved. In this reinterpretation, what Velleman calls selectivity is explained by reference to an actual promise of meaning for the lover, instead of a contingent fit between the more abstract 'empirical persona'. If 'empirical persona' is reformulated in terms of a narrative fit, the difference between love and respect on these accounts also becomes more clear.²⁸ Respecting people is valuing human dignity, something which every human being shares. According to Velleman, respect and love share the same final objects, but Lopez-Cantero's reformulation of Velleman's selectivity makes clear that this final object is only accessed via something that is different in everyone – but is a direct product of that final object. We value personal agency (as the equivalent of rational nature in Velleman's account), but love happens by evaluation of its product: personal narrative. This evaluation will differ since

²⁸ Which is considered a different problem with Velleman's account, pointed out by Edward Harcourt (2009).

every individual's personal narrative is unique. Because love and respect are different evaluation processes, it is possible to respect someone whom we do not love, argues Lopez-Cantero.

Love as passivity: unrealistic images and fantasies

How does 'narrative fit' show the need for love as an activity? I submit that Velleman's and Lopez-Cantero's depiction of what it means to love are problematic: according to them, if we do not have a fit with an individual, it is because his or her empirical persona expresses their dignity poorly to us. Their view is too passive on the side of the lover and ignores some responsibility on the part of the loving agent. Lopez-Cantero's account of love as a narrative fit does not do away with this passive evaluation, because our narratives on her account seem to be just contingently fitting. However, the idea of fitting narratives enables us to paint a better picture of what love is all about. Love is often nothing like a contingent fit, whether that is between empirical persona or narratives. Without ruling out that a contingent fit *could* be part of love, such a fit might not be enough to be (or remain) a good lover. Love does not come easily, loving involves hard work!

Consider the love between Dante and Beatrice (famous for being Dante's muse). Dante was helplessly in love with Beatrice, but during his life they only met a few times; and only twice they had the shortest conversation of greeting each other (Alighieri, 1294). His deep love for Beatrice became his reason to write poetry. More crucially, it became his reason to be alive. In Dante's poems Beatrice appears before him as a ghostly shadow, a half-goddess. She functions as a muse, watches over him and guides him, gives him helpful instructions, or criticizes him. While Beatrice is enormously valuable to Dante, his ideas of her merely consist in projection, prompted by his own desires and feelings. He closes his eyes to the real Beatrice, while focusing on his fantasy of her. Could love not be more valuable – especially if we were Beatrice – than Dante's fantasy? Unfortunately we cannot ask her, since her voice only can be heard in that particular version Dante made of her: a half goddess, merely functioning for Dante's sake.

However, we *can* ask ourselves and the people around us. Dante and Beatrice's love story is obviously an historic example and it was a picture of love painted a long time ago. But we would consider a relationship based

on unrealistic images of the beloved non-ideal today, too. In romantic relationships, we are often blinded by being hopelessly infatuated, so that numerous fantasies about our beloved surface, flooding more uncomfortable realities. I don't want to claim that infatuation is not valuable at all, but I think that most of us would deem a relationship based on unrealistic fantasies, or these fantasies being the core of the relationship throughout time, not the most valuable, meaningful kind of love for both (or more) people involved. Surely the same goes for friendship: if we truly want to connect, we better open ourselves to the reality of our friends. Poet and feminist Adrienne Rich puts it beautifully when she writes:

An honorable human relationship – that is, one in which two people have the right to use the word ‘love’ – is a process, delicate, violent, often terrifying to both persons involved, a process of refining the truths they can tell each other. It is important to do this because it breaks down human self-delusion and isolation. It is important to do this because in doing so we do justice to our own complexity. It is important to do this because we can count on so few people to go that hard way with us. (Rich, 1995, p. 111)

In an honorable human relationship, two people have the right to use the word love, writes Rich. And loving is not such an easy task to take up: it is ‘the hard way’. And this does not solely apply to romantic or personal love, it is applicable to societal issues as well. There are obstacles for looking at the reality around us: physically, when we push particular groups or people out of our sight (e.g. literally putting away refugees), and psychologically, when we are focusing too much on ourselves, our needs and our desires. When groups or human beings don’t understand, appreciate or accept each other, they are often keeping each other – or rather, one is keeping the other – at a distance: we don’t really want to see the other. Or putting it differently: we don’t really want to see each other’s reality, because we are too comfortable with our own. Dante loves ‘the fantasy Beatrice’, he does not love Beatrice. For the real Beatrice, Dante is not a great lover, at all.

Suppose that Dante has recognized Beatrice’s ‘incomparable value as a human being’. Furthermore, to Dante, their empirical persona are contingently fitting. Dante doesn’t have to do anything for this love to emerge: it just happens. He saw her and *boom*, love was in the air. Such a feeling or

happening has been described many times as love (just think of any romantic comedy or pick any love song), but that doesn’t mean this is the type of love or loving that is particularly meaningful to us. For Beatrice, there is not much love to it. On Lopez-Cantero’s account ‘empirical persona’ makes way for ‘narrative fit’, but this is still a detached form of love. The fact that their ‘fit’ happens contingently means that neither Dante nor Beatrice had any part in it, and bear no responsibility whatsoever. The bigger problem is that because of this lack of agency, Dante is not really attending to Beatrice, his desires and needs shaping a self-serving fantastical image of her.

Velleman and Lopez-Cantero could argue that Dante’s love does not count as love on their accounts: Dante is not really valuing Beatrice’s dignity, he just thinks he is, or Dante and Beatrice’s narratives don’t really fit, Dante just thinks they do. Dante thinks he’s in love, but on their account he is not. But even if this were true, just think of the sort of love Velleman *does* have in mind and whether this would make us better lovers. On Velleman’s account responsibility on the part of the lover is missing. In one of his examples he states: “I think that love naturally arises [...]” (1999, p. 361). Such a passive attitude in love is an obstacle for *really looking* at each other. Will Dante ever see the real Beatrice?

Velleman’s account of love is descriptive, not normative, and here our philosophical projects differ. However, even of descriptive projects we can ask what they contribute to the concept in the real world. What do we *want* ‘loving’ to mean? The ameliorative project requires actively making decisions about what to mean when using ‘love’. How can we change the world around us for the better and improve how we use the concept? What use of the word ‘love’ could improve the way we love and how could it impact society? Velleman’s account of love does not suffice: not its contingency, not its passivity. bell hooks is right when she states that, while the word ‘love’ is most often defined as a noun, we would all love better if we used it as a verb (2018, p. 4). Love is particularly meaningful to us when we talk about it in terms of an attitude that one can take up: an ongoing practice or process we can actively engage in. We better use ‘love’ as a verb and it needs an active object.

Love as an ongoing practice: steering away from the ego

Let's view the example of Dante and Beatrice from a Murdochian view of love. For Murdoch, loving consists in looking beyond the ego, focusing our attention to the *particular and the unique*. She holds that to love is to redirect our attention, to learn to perceive the truth about the world and to see what there is outside one (SOG). Constantly attending to our needs, our desires and our thoughts alters our perspective on what the world is actually like and blinds us to the goods around us. Murdoch states that “in the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego” (OGG, SOG, p. 51) and love, as focused attention, is steering away from the ego. We are often so much focused on ourselves, our desires and needs, that we are blind to the things and people around us. However, we do want to truly connect. We appreciate it when the people around us are able to look beyond the limits of their own world and see us for what we actually are. We want to be truly seen, or at least we don't want our lover's needs or desires constantly trumping our experiences, when we are in (any) relationship.

We should therefore think of love as actively attending: a process in which we attend lovingly to our beloveds with an open gaze. This effort does not necessarily require behavioral ‘proof’ that is visible to others. Consider this famous passage from Murdoch in *The Sovereignty of Good*:

A mother (M) feels hostility to her daughter-in-law (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 tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him. [...] Time passes, and it could be that M settles down with a hardened sense of grievance and a fixed picture of D [...]. 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: ‘[...] 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. [...] 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. (IP, SOG, p. 16)

The example shows that M looks at D, she attends to D and focuses her attention. She is trying to see D in a way that goes beyond her own projections, in a way that is not guided by her ego. It takes place in the inner life, in M's mind, but nevertheless is an action: she engages in the practice of focusing her attention on D. It is unlikely that M would come to value D in new ways unless she made the effort to look at her with an open gaze. It is in this sense that love is a realization, an opening up in the sense that it is “the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real” (S&G, E&M, p. 215).

When we are focused on our own desires and needs, we fall prey to the dangers of the ego: we make up fantasies in our minds. Love is meaningful to us when we are able to steer away from our ego and perceive the particularity and uniqueness of a person, their reality. On Velleman's account of love, Dante is able to entertain self-serving fantasies of Beatrice. Love here is something contingent and it suffices to value dignity to speak of love. However, Murdoch's theory of love is a less detached version of the concept, since we must adapt our concepts to the uniqueness of the particular people we meet. Dante should engage in the practice of loving attention, looking at Beatrice with an open gaze, and consequently would see more of the real Beatrice. What would have happened if Dante had engaged in this practice? If he hadn't been blinded by his own desires and needs? If he had not let his ego guide him, but had actively looked at Beatrice? Actively looked at her, opening up in the sense that he had ‘the extremely difficult realization’ that Beatrice, someone other than himself, someone outside his art, his emotions, and his intellect, *was real*. Our desires and fantasies tend to make us blind to the things around us; make everything around us fit the concepts that we already have or believe to be true. But when we focus on the particular and the unique, we can come to know new concepts, new realities and it is more likely that we won't get stuck in our own self-serving worlds. Murdoch is trying to tell us that it is not love that is blind, but our ego.

Real people vs. fantasies

Why is seeing each other's reality so particularly valuable? Being fed up with fantasies about certain persons or groups is a recurring theme in fighting for equality. With such a fight for equality often a call for attention comes along:

look at us, hear us, see our (particular) truth. This call for attention urges its addressees to attend to the reality of a certain group, instead of projecting fantasies onto that group, fueled by the blindness and egos of an oppressive group or society.

Some of the most important feminist works discuss the cultural myths that have been around – or are still very much alive – about the reality of women. In fact, the very notion of mysticism is in titles of some of the most famous feminist works of the past century. With *The Feminine Mystique* Betty Friedan challenged the widely shared belief in the 1950s that “fulfillment as a woman had only one definition for American women after 1949—the housewife-mother” (1963). The phrase ‘feminine mystique’ was created by Friedan to show the assumptions that women would be fulfilled from their housework, marriage, sexual lives, and children. It was said that women, who were actually feminine, should not have wanted work, get an education, or have political opinions. By portraying that image as mystique, Friedan showed the reality of many of these women; namely that they were dreadfully unhappy. In turn Friedan was criticized for being blind to the experiences of women other than those belonging to the white middle class. bell hooks labeled Friedan’s project narcissistic and self-indulgent and writes in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*: “She did not speak of the needs of women without men, without children, without homes. She ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women” (2000). Another book that specifically talks about the harmfulness of blindness and fantasies is *The Beauty Myth*, in which Naomi Wolf (1991) gives us a similar argument when describing societies’ fantasies of female beauty. Although she wrote the book in the early nineties, the argument never ceased to be relevant. The pressure that many women feel to adhere to unrealistic social norms of physical beauty is still leading to unhealthy behavior and an obsession with the female appearance for both sexes, today. Many men (and women) have unrealistic beliefs about the physical female beauty, the physical appearances of real human beings. Fantasies, such as ‘women do not grow body hair’, ‘hair is smooth and straight and certainly not Afro-textured’ or ‘all women are hourglass shaped’ create detachment between real people. Firstly, it obstructs a connection because unrealistic beliefs make for unrealistic expectations which could lead to disappointment. Secondly, it obstructs a connection because many are trapped in the conflict between expectation

and reality, wanting to live up to expectations and thus constantly engage in self-masking or self-destructive behavior – in Wolf’s example: shaving, waxing, laserizing, dyeing, relaxing,²⁹ a thirty-something step beauty routine, and dieting obsessively.

Now one might try to point out the irrelevance of my argument by arguing that one does not *want* to love real human beings, or that loving fantasies is particularly valuable. Some might be particularly happy living inside their fantasies, without harsh reality ruining self-serving dreams. Furthermore, it takes some effort to actually look at others’ reality, especially from a privileged position in which the world is built for your comfort. Secretly, we might not want to learn new concepts. It is not my intention to make the moral case that love should be love only between real human beings and that it is, in any case, wrong to love fantasies. The argument here is about *better lovers* and how we can improve how we use the concept ‘love’. If we want love to be something meaningful between real human beings, as opposed to self-serving fantasies, we need to take up the activity of focusing our attention outside ourselves. Above all, privileged persons have all the more reason to engage in an activity of loving attention if they want to be better lovers. The problem often is however, that until privileged people (myself included in many respects, as a white, educated, non-disabled person) are really looking, we are not aware that we are so privileged, somewhat stuck in our own realities.

There is a positive argument in favor of the role of fantasies, too. Lisa Bortolotti argues that optimistically biased beliefs can help us attain our goals, based on literature on positive illusions in the perception of romantic partners (2018). Bortolotti argues that optimistic beliefs lead to goal attainment by sustaining our motivation to act after we experience setbacks or when some of our cherished goals are under threat. Multiple positive illusions could benefit our relationships in this way. One could have optimism bias underestimating the likelihood of getting a divorce even when we are well-informed about the high divorce rates in this society (Baker and Emery, 1993; Fowers et al., 2001). Such a bias may be supported by other positive illusions about the relationship: the relationship *superiority bias* occurs when we rate our relationship as better than most, while we experience the *love-is-*

²⁹ Referring to the chemically straightening of tight curly (e.g. Afro-textured) hair, not to relaxing as calming or unwinding activity.

blind illusion when we are blind to our romantic partners' faults and perceive our partners as better than average in a number of domains, including intelligence and attractiveness (Buunk and van den Eijnden, 1997; Murray et al., 1996a, b; Rusbult et al., 2000). We tend to idealize our partners' qualities and this could be beneficial for the relationship we have with them, Bortolotti argues. The idealization of romantic partners helps us continue to value the relationship as something worth working on, and is linked to more satisfying and more stable relationships in both the short and the long term.

Some of the positive effects Bortolotti mentions seem plausible, such as having a strong sense of security and confidence in a relationship as a result of partner idealization, or reinterpreting our partners' weaknesses as strengths. But I suggest that, when engaging in the ameliorative project, Bortolotti's approach is too one-sided, much like Velleman's. While Velleman focuses too much on the beloved and how they express themselves, Bortolotti focuses too much on the lover. She is focusing on the optimistic agent, and whether optimistic beliefs are good or bad for this particular agent.

Since we are focusing on being better lovers, there is much more to consider here. Loving people involves two (or more) people; at least a lover and a beloved (this is even true of unrequited love, or loving very young children). Bortolotti's one-sided approach is probably due to focusing on the effects of optimistic beliefs on psychological health: whether true or false beliefs lead to psychological wellbeing or distress. That is, psychological wellbeing or distress *for the agent having the beliefs*. Bortolotti argues: "the belief that the partners share features with us and with our ideal partners sustains our motivation to solve the problems our relationship may be facing" (2018, p. 530). That might be true, but if we want to discuss better love, we need a more nuanced approach. Or rather, we need to add another standpoint. Bortolotti's approach is much like investigating whether Dante's illusions of Beatrice are healthy for Dante's psychological wellbeing, or have positive effects for *his* take on their relationship (whatever relationship that might be). But those questions should make us at least a bit uncomfortable, knowing there was another person involved. It feels as if we're asking the wrong questions – or rather, asking not enough questions. What about Beatrice? What about her experiences, beliefs and psychological wellbeing?

Bortolotti continues: "In order for us to be successful agents in the face of constant challenges, we need to believe that we can change things for

the better, and in order to do that we need to have a sense of competence, control, and efficacy that propels us forward, a sense that our goals are indeed desirable and attainable" (2018, p. 531). While this is not something I want to argue against, I think that, to 'change things for the better' we should at least look at everyone involved, unless we only want to change things for the better for no-one but ourselves. Such a project would surely not be what most people have in mind thinking about being better lovers. When one tries to answer those missing questions, one would see that, while the positive illusions might be beneficial for Dante, they are probably not that beneficial for Beatrice. Dante's positive illusions paint such an unrealistic picture of Beatrice, that it silences her real self. Beatrice has no voice: we don't know who she is, what she experiences or what she wants.

Focusing too much on the beneficial consequences of positive illusions for the lover would neglect the process of attending to the beloved. Bortolotti argues, by focusing on the loving agent, that positive illusions could make for stable relationships by giving the agent the motivation *to work for that relationship*. Bortolotti's account thus seems to be more about stable relationships than about being better lovers. And while those could influence each other, it is certainly possible to have a stable relationship without being good lovers, e.g. a very oppressive, but stable, relationship.

Besides a too narrow focus, Bortolotti mentions one particular effect of optimistic beliefs that could turn out as not just meaningless love, but harmful for the beloved. The effect furthermore shows the need for love as actively attending to real people. Sandra Murray and colleagues discuss an effect of partner idealization that is labeled as *reflective appraisals*: when partners are idealized, they come to see themselves as we see them, and live up to our high standards (Murray et al., 1996b). Based on this view, Bortolotti argues that positive illusions can bring success in romantic relationships not because perceptions of the romantic partners are realistic, but because they have a positive effect on our behavior in the relationship and support us in the pursuit of our relationship-related goals when problems emerge (2018, p. 527). "Intimates can actually turn self-perceived frogs into the princes or princesses they perceive them to be" (Murray et al., 1996b, p. 1158). But it seems to depend heavily on the nature of the illusion whether such a process of adapting to others' expectations is necessarily a good thing. If men having the illusions of thin, hourglass-shaped, hairless women leads to women

living up to those expectations, adapting to your lover's illusions could be quite harmful (see the passage about *The Beauty Myth* above). Murray et al. found that over time, the idealized evaluations became more realistic, not because people experienced disappointment and lowered their expectations accordingly, but because partners rose up to the challenge and exhibited the qualities that were initially attributed to them. As a result of reflective appraisals, the gap between idealization and reality shrinks. But this is not necessarily a good thing, considering the particular example above of self-masking or self-destructing behavior, only to live up to expectations.

Furthermore, the mechanism of illusions turning into beauty standards seems to be about non-moral ideals,³⁰ but what about illusions about someone's moral character? Reflective appraisals could turn out great when we expect someone to be good: what could be wrong with someone trying to live up to expectations concerning moral character? Here, again, it seems to depend heavily on the nature of the illusion whether the process of adapting to others' expectations could be harmful. Depending on the society we live in, there are particular expectations of, for example, a 'good woman'. While the dominant expectations fortunately no longer include role patterns of wives cooking and husbands breadwinning, many other unequal patterns and expectations are still at play. Kate Manne points out roles and standards of Western society, in which women are considered *moral givers* (2017). A 'good girl' gives, doesn't ask for anything, is expected to be grateful, owes things to others as opposed to being entitled to something – especially 'moral goods', such as attention, care, sympathy, respect, admiration. Manne further explains that we must understand misogyny as a characteristic of such social environments, in which women are susceptible to hostility due to the maintenance of these expectations: women are considered ungrateful, sour, aggressive or worse when they don't live up to these expectations. If these kind of idealized evaluations become more realistic because partners rise up to the challenge and exhibit the qualities that are attributed to them, reflective appraisal is (in this case) a harmful dynamic; a powerplay by which suppressed groups continue to be suppressed by ongoing fantasies of the oppressor.

³⁰ Although Heather Widdows makes a compelling case for beauty being considered an ethical ideal in her book *Perfect me* (2018).

This dynamic could be harmful for men, too: it is not too hard to come up with examples of harmful fantasies that concern men: 'men never cry', 'men are sexual predators'. Moreover, it is not solely a gender issue, but something that concerns all forms of inequality, stereotypes and social patterns: 'black women are hypersexual', 'black men are dangerous' and so on.

A meaningful connection in which 'two people have the right to use the word love', as Rich put it, should look past stereotypes, social patterns and self-serving fantasies. Only by attending to the particular and unique around us, we can let go of our self-serving worlds. Murdoch herself did not advocate political use of loving attention. However, loving attention would make us better lovers in general and enable us to live better with the real people around us. Fantasies are only given room to grow when we keep someone (or a certain group) out of our sight or at an emotional distance. Velleman would probably not argue that loving fantasies is particularly valuable, but his account of love is not equipped to prevent or combat idealized fantasies. Loving, as both described by Murdoch and argued for here, focuses on eliminating these fantasies. Adapting our concepts to the uniqueness of the different people we meet, by looking at the world around us. Boxes, categorizations and stereotypes make way for real people.

The ongoing practice: getting to know vs. knowledge

I have discussed several distinctions between Velleman's and Murdoch's account of love, and argued that a Murdochian kind of loving is better suited for the ameliorative project. Love should be more than contingent and requires actively looking. Furthermore, loving should go beyond seeing another's dignity: it is precisely looking at the particular and unique that helps us move away from our ego, a practice we need to escape self-serving fantasies and to see the reality of others.

There is another important aspect to this. To love better is to engage in an *ongoing* practice. We are successful when we *engage* in this activity, not when we reach a particular goal such as a contingent fit or valuing a person's dignity. Love is a process; a progressive attempt. Really looking at others is not easy. It is 'the hard way', writes Rich. Are we ever able to see someone's truth? Are we not always bound by the concepts we have and therefore never able to really see someone? And if so, what is 'better love' exactly aiming at?

What if Dante actively engages in an activity of focused loving attention, but still fails to see some aspects of Beatrice's truth? And how well do we have to know each other to speak about love?³¹

Seeing our loved one's reality must not be mistaken for knowing everything about them or even understanding them. 'Better love' as it is argued for here, does not entail that we know or need to know every detail about our beloved. Carla Bagnoli (2018) rightly points out that sometimes understanding might be too violent a modality of relating to others, "like poking into their private reality, rather than simply accepting their alterity and respecting their opacity" (p. 82). Love does not aim at completely understanding others. Love has no 'end goal', which would entail particular knowledge about the beloved. Loving, on this account, indeed does not aim, but is the process of getting to know others. It is an ongoing practice, being perceptive of others as they are.

Murdoch knew perfectly well that we are never really able to see reality successfully. We can only look through our own eyes, with our own concepts, culture and history. Perception is therefore a restricted capacity: what we see depends on what particular concepts we have, and if we don't have (or acquire) the right conceptual resources, we might be forever blind to some particular parts of the truth. It might be impossible for Dante to know Beatrice's reality. For example some of her experiences will always remain hidden to Dante to a certain extent: he will never know what it feels like to give birth. If we cannot succeed in seeing truth, why would being open to this truth be a better way of loving?

With the example of M and D Murdoch wanted to imagine a case in which the reader could feel approval of M's change of view. She also admits (the example is especially designed that way) that in real life it might be very hard to decide whether M's ultimate judgment of D in the example is morally appropriate or not (IP, SOG, p. 17). The reader doesn't know D, and therefore cannot evaluate whether D is really a good-hearted girl, or whether M's loving attention leads M either to see truth or just to see more fantasies. There is not enough space here to elaborate extensively on Murdoch's view of morality or her meta-ethical perspective. But what happens in the example of M is important. It is used to show that moral

31 This is a question Eileen John asks in her paper 'Love and the need for comprehension' (2013).

activity can happen in the inner life, and Murdoch positions herself against the "existentialist-behaviourist types of moral psychology" (IP, SOG, p. 9) who claim that "mental concepts must be analyzed, genetically and so the inner must be thought of as parasitic upon the outer" (p. 10). On such a view M's change of mind about D is an empty activity, because no kind of outer structure is present. But Murdoch wants to show that M is engaged in an internal struggle and that her activity feels very familiar. Furthermore, M's activity is peculiarly her own: she could not do this thing in conversation with another person, so the quasi-scientific notion 'anything which is to count as definite reality must be open to several observers' cannot be applied to this example (p. 22). Murdoch's point is that what M is doing, i.e. focusing her attention outside herself, counts as a *moral activity*. Murdoch even puts this activity, i.e. love, at the center of morality.

Murdoch's entire concept of love and morality is a concept of progression: loving attention (and being good) is "infinitely perfectible" (p. 23). Loving, or the picture she paints of it, has built in the notion of a necessary fallibility. M is attached to the concepts she has and can do nothing but try to see the truth.

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. (IP, SOG, p. 23)

What is at stake, says Murdoch, is the liberation of morality and philosophy as a study of human nature, from the domination of science (IP, SOG, p. 26). Morality is less to do with the isolated will jumping in and out of an impersonal logical complex, and more with the progressive attempt to see a particular object clearly.

In *The Sublime and the Good* Murdoch argues, by juxtaposing Kant and Hegel, that seeing that object – 'the sublime' – clearly, is always a progressive attempt (E&M, pp. 205-220). Kant thinks of the sublime as not given but only vaguely adumbrated by reason, only occasioned by natural objects (non-historical, non-social, non-human), a systematic perception of nature in which time, place and the nature of our sensibility play no part (S&G,

E&M, p. 213). Hegel, on the other hand, makes social and historical and human and concrete what Kant has offered as abstract, non-historical, etc.: the unity of the ethical substance is given. For Murdoch, both are wrong (or both are somewhat right!). For Murdoch there is, contra Hegel, an abstract essence of morality, which she names the Good. Contra Kant, we can only perceive this essence within our own place, time and with our own eyes, she argues.

Do we really have to choose between an image of total freedom and an image of total determinism? Can we not give a more balanced and illuminating account of the matter? I suggest we can if we simply introduce into the picture the idea of attention, or looking, of which I was speaking above. 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. (IP, SOG, p. 35-36)

Murdoch argues that moral tasks are characteristically endless, not only because, within a concept, our efforts are imperfect, but also because as we move, really look and open up, our concepts themselves are changing (IP, SOG, p. 27). “M’s independence of science [...] rests not simply in her moving will but in her seeing knowing mind” (p. 27). Love is getting to know the individual and M confronted with D has an endless task. At the end of the example, M sees D as ‘spontaneous’ and ‘delightfully youthful’. But since M has an endless task, the example might as well go on while M continues to look upon D with loving attention. It might be the case that M later alters her view of D from ‘spontaneous’ to ‘somewhat impulsive’, for example, after continuously looking at D without letting her own desires and needs play a part. This imaginative continuation of the example also shows that loving attention is not meant to be ‘judging everything as positive’; it is about trying to see the Good as an *obedience to reality* (IP, SOG, p. 41), while knowing that we could never fully grasp that reality. Even though Dante will never fully grasp Beatrice’s reality, opening his eyes, engaging in loving attention, focusing on Beatrice as particular and unique beyond his ego, is engaging in moral activity. It is not the facts, the outer activity or mental concepts that can be analyzed that matter morally. It is the inner activity, the effort of directing our attention on individuals, of obedience to reality as

an exercise of love. Murdoch suggests that ‘reality’ and ‘individual’ present themselves to us in moral contexts as ideal end-point, an end-point imperfect humans cannot ever reach, but must aim at. “This surely is the place where the concept of good lives. ‘Good’: ‘Real’: ‘Love’. These words are closely connected”, writes Murdoch (IP, SOG, p. 41).

The value of using the concept of love as an ongoing practice is thus that we have to adjust our concepts constantly to the reality outside us. Dante is never done getting to know Beatrice; never will he have an amount of knowledge of Beatrice that is a particular end-goal. The value of the practice of love is not in the knowledge we have of our beloveds, but in the ongoing effort to get to know each other. Dante could argue that he knows Beatrice, but is not able to move away from his ego, not able to get rid of his harmful self-serving fantasies, unless he engages in an ongoing effort of really looking at her.

Suppose Dante would engage in loving practice and learn that Beatrice is interested in mathematics, is a big fan of hip-hop and has a birth mark on her left forearm. Although he now has some knowledge of Beatrice, the moment Dante quits this practice the dangers of the ego are lurking. Firstly, he doesn’t learn *more* about Beatrice and harmful fantasies about the things he doesn’t know about her yet – e.g. ‘women effortlessly having no body hair’ – could prevail. Secondly, Beatrice could change – e.g. changing her musical preference from hip-hop to neo-soul – and Dante would be stuck with an old image of her, back again at being blind for the real Beatrice. The ongoing aspect of love as a practice is important to ensure that we don’t fall back on fantasies. Velleman’s account is not equipped to improve the way we love, in this sense too, because he fails to incorporate this ongoing activity.

The phrase ‘love as a practice’ already reveals something about the nature of this love considering knowledge of the individual. Knowledge seems to be the *result*, while ‘getting to know something or someone’ is the activity, the progressive attempt Murdoch describes as love. To be better lovers is not about what or how much knowledge we have of each other, but rather the practice of being open to others. Loving is *attending*, not the knowledge we get out of this attention. Surely we do want our lovers to know something about us, but there’s no threshold of how much we should know about our beloveds to speak of love in this sense. In her paper ‘Love and the Need for Comprehension’ Eileen John defends the possibility of love

with failure of comprehension (2013). She argues that the beloved person has a say as to the kind and depth of knowledge that is required to count as loving him or her. The beloved has to be able to recognize herself in the love (2013, p. 286) and this involves acknowledging the beloved as a being with consciousness, interests and authority over *what is important to her*. This might solve Beatrice's problem: Dante's love would not count as love because Beatrice probably would not feel acknowledged as herself. But it does not fix the problem of reflective appraisals: fantasies lead to (harmful) expectations that many beloveds want to live up to. In the light of this mechanism it seems strange to 'put the burden' of whether someone's love counts as love on the beloved person (having a say as to the kind and depth of knowledge is required to count as loving her), while at the same time, the beloved adapts – or feels pressure to adapt – the qualities or interests of what the knowledge is about to the fantasies of the lover. I suggest that we should not look at thresholds for knowledge to speak of love, but rather at progressive attempts. It is not the knowledge that others have of us that makes love meaningful. It is the effort of a lover willing to put their ego aside and open up, the ongoing activity of really looking at us.

Furthermore, the knowledge our lovers have of us is always colored by the particular concepts they have. A lover might know that I'm a philosopher, but her concept of what that exactly entails depends on her concepts and experiences; her frame of reference. What is so particular meaningful in loving, is that it is a *constant* attempt to look past our own egos and see the people and things around us. My lover constantly adapts her concept of what a philosopher is by continuously looking at me and my experiences. Loving forces us to adjust what we know to what we see, but since what we see depends on what we already know, the activity is progressive, and infinitely perfectible. If we keep attending to everything outside us, we can come to know more and more about the world and people around us.

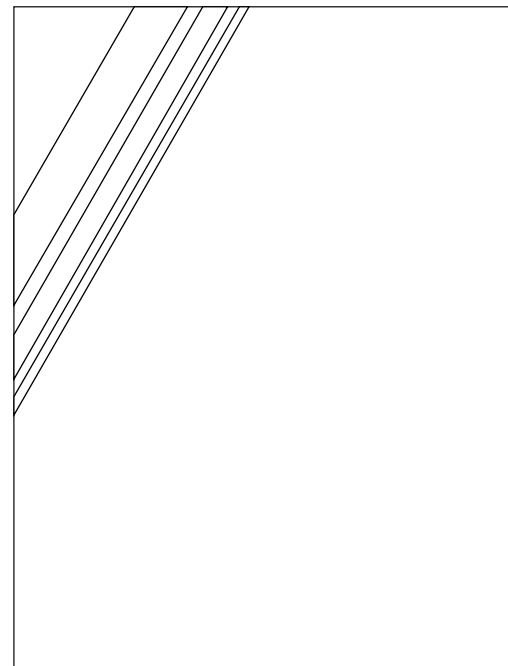
This is not to say that we should *accept* everything we see or work towards that: really looking could reveal things we should not be accepting. Loving attention precisely is able to discern immorality and inequality by 'seeing someone's truth', as well as discovering patterns and see social structures as these are part of the particular person we are attending to (Clarke, 2012). Attending to someone could on the one hand reveal some possibly good character traits or explanations of character, but it will also reveal that

person's immoral actions and character traits we disapprove of. Loving in this sense is the opposite of blindly embracing: really looking can be *eye-opening*.

We only have our own eyes to look with, our own backgrounds, culture, upbringing and so forth. It is inevitably difficult to form connections when we notice differences between ourselves and others. It might take much longer before we are able to really look at those who are different and it might take a while before we can even catch a glimpse of their reality. Some groups or experiences are almost invisible because of e.g. non-appearance in the media or science. Love as attending to the things outside ourselves could therefore not only make us better (romantic) lovers, but make us form meaningful connections with people of different genders, skin colors, sexual preferences than our own. Are we willing to escape our self-serving egos? If we are willing to put in some effort and engage in an ongoing activity of opening up to each other, to put our ego aside trying to see each other's truths, we could all be progressively better lovers.

3.

Taking the Love Pill: a Reply to Naar and Nyholm



The recent debate

There has been some discussion whether pharmaceuticals or other emerging technologies can and should be used to enhance love in adult romantic partnerships. Julian Savulescu et al. argue that love is one of the things we can improve upon using biomedical enhancements (2008; 2010, Earp et al., 2012; 2013, Pugh et al., 2013). For simplifying purposes, I will, from now on, speak of these biomedical enhancements as if they were a love pill we could take, having the exact same result as the biomedical enhancements, pharmaceuticals, hormonal treatments or other technologies that come up in the discussion.

Sven Nyholm (2015) argues, against Savulescu et al., that the use of this love pill in our romantic relationships would fail to secure the final value we attribute to love. On Nyholm's view, one thing we intrinsically desire in seeking love is to be at the origin of the love others have for us. The satisfaction of this desire, he argues, is incompatible with the use of a love pill insofar as it is responsible for the attachment characteristic of love. Nyholm argues that we don't want some external agency to bring about the lover's tendency to bestow loving care upon us if we are to think of this care as an instance or expression of love. We desire that we ourselves are able to activate this disposition on the part of the lover, without there being a need for something else to activate it.

Love is, in this way, a sort of confirmation that we are, as we might put it, 'lovable' in the sense of being able to inspire or call forth such dispositions in another (namely, the lover). Part, but not the whole, of what our lover gives us in loving us, in other words, is this confirmation of us as really being able, or having the power, to inspire loving devotion in another. (Nyholm, 2015, p. 196)

If we had to supply our lover with a love pill in order to call forth the relevant sorts of dispositions to act in a caring way in relation to us, then this, Nyholm argues, would show that we are not lovable in the way that, in having the good of somebody's love, we are shown to be. Hence, taking a love pill would, according to Nyholm, deprive us of the final value we attribute to love.

Abstract: In recent discussions about whether the use of a love pill to enhance love in our romantic relationships is desirable, one argument centres on the question whether this love pill would secure the final value we attribute to love. Sven Nyholm (2015) argues that it would not, because one thing we desire for its own sake is to be at the origin of the love others feel for us. In a reply, Hichem Naar (2016) argues against Nyholm that a love pill does not need to be incompatible with the final value we attribute to love and that a love pill can have a facilitating role in the creation and sustainment of loving attachment. This paper argues that Naar is right but does not address Nyholm's worry completely. It argues that Naar and Nyholm are speaking of different ends for which the love pill is used as a means, and that whether the love pill would fail or not fail to secure the final value we attribute to love, depends on this particular end.

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In a reply, Hichem Naar (2016) questions Nyholm's argument and argues that using the love pill to create or sustain the sort of attachment characteristic of love does not need to be less desirable than creating or sustaining this attachment by more ordinary means, such as dancing or romantic music. He argues that Nyholm underestimates the significance of the various factors that are in some way external to the beloved in the formation and persistence of successful romantic relationships,

[...] such as lighting conditions, room temperature, energy levels, health, background music, dancing romantic weekends, and so on. Such factors, although involving the other person in some way, are *not* the other person. (Naar, 2016, p. 200, italics in text)

Furthermore, Naar argues that we need these external factors to play a role in our romantic relationships and that without them, many relationships would not even exist. As a result, he claims, there are factors that are not the other person and that play a significant role in the formation and persistence of our attachment to them. Such factors are generally not problematic because of their *facilitating* role in the creation and sustainment of our attachment to others, so the mere fact that some external factors are needed for our attachment to be secured does not warrant our rejection of them (p. 200). Naar concludes with the possibility of the love pill having a facilitating role in the creation and sustainment of our attachment to others.³²

Naar offers an appealing argument, but I will argue that it doesn't address Nyholm's worries completely. I will argue that if Naar is right about the possibility of using the love pill as a facilitator, whether its use would fail or not fail to secure the final value we attribute to love depends on the particular end for which the love pill is used. I will conclude with a suggestion about why it matters for which end a love-enhancement is used, which has to do with the idea of lovers being able to freely commit to each other.

³² Earp, Sandberg and Savulescu refer to the discussion between Nyholm and Naar and draw on Naar's response for their argument in Earp, B.D., Sandberg, A. & Savulescu, J. (2016). The Medicinalization of Love: Response to Critics, *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, 25, 4, pp. 759–771.

Taking the love pill for different ends

Many of us want to be at the origin of the love of our beloved, that is, we want that our beloved's love depends in great part on us. Few people would like the thought that their beloved has to try very hard to love them or indeed needs pills to secure their love for them. However, Naar is also right about the possibility of the love pill playing a facilitating role, as much as other external factors can play a role in creating or sustaining love without losing the final value we attribute to love that Nyholm is talking about. The fact that I am more likely to sustain my loving attachment to my beloved when listening to romantic music does not mean that my love does not depend in great part on my beloved.

For the sake of the argument I will assume that Nyholm is right about the final value we attribute to love: we want to be at the origin of the love others have for us and one's attachment should depend in great part on the beloved. I also assume that the love pill is capable of facilitating the creation and sustainment of loving attachment, like other additional factors such as a glass of wine or romantic music. These factors can make the emergence of loving attachment more likely, without losing the final value we attribute to love. So far, it seems as if I am in agreement with Naar.

However I think Naar doesn't address Nyholm's argument completely. Tellingly, Nyholm does not worry as much about wine as he does about a love pill. The explanation must be that his objection against the use of the love pill presupposes that the love pill is used for a specific end. Suppose that when I drink a glass of wine or listen to romantic music I am more likely to create or sustain a loving attachment than when I don't. This tells us something about *enabling a general capacity for loving*, not about *creating or sustaining of love for a particular beloved*. These are different ends. It seems to me that Naar and Nyholm are talking at cross purposes insofar as they have in mind *different ends for taking the love pill*. Let me argue for this interpretation of their disagreement in more detail.

It is not true that when I drink a glass of wine, I am more likely to love person A rather than person B because of the wine. It might be true that I am more likely to love person A rather than person B, but this must be due to other factors than the wine. Would my preference for person A be a result of the wine, then the wine would be some sort of love potion which

makes me fall in love with particular person A. However, I think we can assume that wine as we know it does not have this effect. Wine operates on one's psychology in a rather coarse-grained manner: it is known to, among other things, slow down the functioning of the prefrontal cortex, which is linked to reasoning and judgment (Casbon et. al., 2003). Effects like these could facilitate the creation or sustainment of love, by, for example, judging people in a different manner than in a sober condition. However, wine does not have complete control over one's judgment, one's love and one's love for a particular person. The same goes for other facilitating factors for loving attachment that Naar mentions, such as health, romantic music or energy levels. These factors could indeed play a significant role in the formation and persistence of successful romantic relationships, precisely as Naar claims, but they do not have complete control. These factors play a role in *enabling a general capacity for loving* while this love is already directed at a particular person, or is directed at a particular person by the work of other factors. They do not, and this is crucial, play a role in the formation and persistence of *love for a particular person*.

How a love-enhancement of the facilitating kind works could be understood in two ways. It could either be understood as 1) removing some obstacle that hinders somebody from being able to love, or 2) helping to unleash a pre-existing potential for loving. The quite imaginable case of a person that is unable to love because of a depression and therefore takes a love pill, could be understood in either or both of these two ways: the love-enhancement might remove an obstacle of loving (viz. the depression), or it might help to unleash the inner potential for loving (which is hampered by the depression). Both ways are not a threat to the final value we attribute to love. In these situations the love pill enables a general capacity for loving and does not create or sustain love for a particular person.

When we distinguish between two ends the love pill could be used for, namely 1) enabling a general capacity for loving and 2) creating or sustaining of love for a particular person (from now on I will call this the Crucial Distinction), we can see that Nyholm and Naar might be talking about different ends and *therefore* have a different view on whether taking the love pill would be desirable. Naar is talking about the use of the love pill for the first end, when talking about its facilitating role. Nyholm, in contrast, when he is saying that a love pill fails to secure the final value we attribute to love,

is talking about taking the love pill for the second end. People not capable of loving attachment in general and taking a love pill for the first end might be a less problematic scenario for the perspective offered by Nyholm. In that case the love pill could indeed play a facilitating role without losing the final value we attribute to love.

One could argue that love is always directed at a particular person and that therefore the Crucial Distinction does not hold. I do not want to argue here for the claim that love is or is not always directed at a particular person. However, the Crucial Distinction needs some clarification. What I mean with the distinction is the following: when a love pill is used to enable a general capacity for loving, the love pill is responsible for the creation or sustaining of the feelings of love and other general aspects of the mind-set of somebody who loves, while other factors are responsible for the particular object of the love. So while feelings of love and other general aspects of the mind-set of a lover are created or sustained by a love pill, the object of the love is determined by the same factors as would have determined the object when one had not taken a love pill. But when a love pill is used for creating or sustaining love for a particular person, the love pill itself is responsible for both the feelings of love and the object of the love. Consider an analogy with Cupid who – in some but not all stories – needs two arrows to make you fall in love with a particular person. One arrow hits you, which invokes a strong feeling of desire in you. A desire that, if Cupid stops intervening, has to find its object by other means. This would be analogous to creating or sustaining general loving. But Cupid can also shoot a second arrow, hitting the particular person you are supposed to fall in love with. Cupid is, by shooting the second arrow, also responsible for the object of your desire. This would be analogous to creating or sustaining love for a particular person.

The desirability of the love pill

I submit that the Crucial Distinction is helpful in the debate about whether taking the love pill would be desirable. Not only does it leave room for both Nyholm's and Naar's arguments, it also refines a claim in a passage from a paper by Savulescu and Sandberg. They claim that many people see the use of love drugs in order to maintain an existing previously loving relationship as acceptable, but are more troubled by the idea of using a love pill to

initiate love (2008). They argue that this view may be mistaken and offer the following argument:

Imagine John and Betty are in love and have been for 10 years. But John becomes prone to mild depression. This affects their relationship adversely. He starts to lose interest in Betty, becomes absorbed in himself, grumpy, withdrawn and painful to be around. He takes an antidepressant and their love is maintained. From the point of view of their relationships and his life, he has good reason to take the drug. Jack and Gill are not in love. Jack is depressed and this prevents love developing. They stay together because Gill became pregnant by accident and they have a child. They intend to stay together for the sake of their child. Jack could take a drug which would facilitate them falling in love – Prozac. He has the same reason as John, but in this case it creates rather than maintains love. His taking the pill seems as acceptable as John's. (Savulescu and Sandberg, 2008, p. 38)

In this example John and Jack both take the love pill because they are, at this moment, not capable of the feeling of love and hope the pill will facilitate the creation (Jack) or sustainment (John) of a loving attachment. In the terminology of the Crucial Distinction, both uses of the love pill can be said to play a *facilitating* role without necessarily losing the final value we attribute to love. John taking the antidepressant does not change the fact that Betty is at the origin of his loving attachment. The same goes for Jack: taking Prozac does not mean that Gill would not be at the origin of his love, because Prozac does not make Jack fall in love with Gill in particular.

Savulescu and Sandberg claim that people may be mistaken when they see the use of the love pill as a means to maintain an existing previously loving relationship as acceptable, while being more troubled by the idea of using love drugs to initiate love. But I think that Savulescu and Sandberg's example can be misleading: does Jack take the love pill because he wants to *love* Gill? Or does Jack take the love pill because he wants to *love Gill*? Whether Jack is taking the love pill because he wants to be able to feel love, of which he is sure it will be directed at Gill (through other factors) or whether he is taking the love pill because he is not able to feel love that is specifically directed at Gill, does matter for the final value we attribute to love. Savulescu and Sandberg overlook this fact when they interpret the divergent intuitions

of people as based on a mistake or confusion. The main worry behind these supposedly mistaken intuitive judgments, might be grounded in the fact that a love pill used to *initiate* a loving relationship evokes the idea of the love pill determining the object of the love like a love potion. These people might be overlooking the fact that the love pill, like in the Jack and Gill example, can be used as a facilitator in the creation of loving attachment in general, while indeed some other factors (linked to the beloved) need to be in place to direct love at that particular person. A more charitable interpretation of people's intuitive judgments is not that they are irrational or inconsistent, but that they interpret the example in a different way than is done by Savulescu and Sandberg. It is not obvious that this interpretation rests on a mistake: many people think of the example as portraying the difference between facilitating and determining love, while Savulescu and Sandberg think it is about the (admittedly less important) difference between initiating and sustaining love.

Love potions

In order to claim that the distinction between the different ends is helpful in the debate about the desirability of the love pill, there should be some evidence that the Crucial Distinction is not artificial and that love pills creating or sustaining love for a particular person are a realistic possibility. Such a technology should not only be able to create or sustain the feeling of love, but also be able to direct that love at a particular person. It should have a much more fine-grained impact on one's psychology than the effect of facilitators like wine. Naar acknowledges at the end of his paper that love pills that work in an analogous way to love potions, would indeed be undesirable, but adds that love pills of these kind are unrealistic (2016, p. 200). I disagree with Naar and will explain, with the modesty of being a philosopher and not a neuro-scientist, why the existence of love pills aiming at creating or sustaining love for a particular person might become a realistic possibility. First of all, Naar could be right that pills (and other technologies) that guarantee falling in love with a particular person is not possible on the short term. However, considering accelerating developments in our understanding of the brain and exponential growth in technological possibilities, we cannot exclude the possibility that such a love pill can be created in the future. We merely have to imagine that research of the brain

in love, as well as ongoing developments in deep brain stimulation (sending electrical impulses to specific targets in the brain) and developments in brain hacking³³ are brought together in a system or technology that activates the right regions of the brain in the right manner every time you are close to a particular person. Helen Fisher published a study in 2005 that included the first functional MRI (fMRI) images of the brains of people in love. Two of the brain regions that showed activity in the fMRI scans were the caudate nucleus, a region associated with reward detection and expectation and the ventral tegmental area, which is associated with pleasure, focused attention, and the motivation to pursue and acquire rewards. The development of a technology that activates precisely these regions when you are with a particular person, might not be too far-fetched. Such a technology would condition someone to feel something that can become understood as love. Another contribution to a realistic love potion could come from results of studies in partner preference. For example studies that investigate the roles pheromones play in partner choice, or the study that suggests that hormonal contraception may have some effect on women's preferences for sexual partners (Roberts et. al., 2014). It will only be a matter of time before we understand the details of partner choice and the brain in love making it realistic that this information can be used for other purposes.

One might still not be completely convinced of the possibility that love pills one day become love potions. But I submit that, even when this is not a realistic possibility, the Crucial Distinction is helpful because it unravels confusion that seems to be going on in the debate. If Naar thinks that no drug working as a love potion could really exist, there does not seem to be a disagreement with Nyholm's argument, because Nyholm is talking about exactly those love pills that Naar thinks are unrealistic. Naar and Nyholm are talking about different love pills, which clarifies why they have different opinions

³³ Brain hacking in animals is already used in reconstructing natural insects into steerable robots, stimulating living insects to induce user-desired motor actions and behaviours (Choo, H. Y., Li, Y., Cao, F., & Sato, H. (2016). Electrical Stimulation of Coleopteran Muscle for Initiating Flight. *PLoS one*, 11(4), e0151808). Although these cyborgs are insects, whose brain and body cannot be compared with those of humans, and the controlled actions are bodily movements which cannot be compared to human love, the knowledge of controlling muscles in animals by hacking their brains and bodies and its application will give more insight in how to control or stimulate the brains or bodies in larger animals, like humans.

about the desirability of them. Either there is a disagreement and Naar doesn't address Nyholm's worries completely, or there is no disagreement at all. The same goes for Savulescu et al.: they might not conceive of enhancements as like love potions. In that case there does not seem to be a disagreement with Nyholm's argument, because in that case Nyholm talks about a different love pill compared to the love pill Savulescu et al. are talking about. Alternatively, one might also say that Nyholm (2015) has changed the topic by construing love enhancers on the model of love potions, while that was never the meaning intended in Savulescu et al. (2008; 2010, Earp et al., 2012; 2013, Pugh et al., 2013). In the end, Nyholm, Naar and Savulescu might even all agree that love enhancements as love potions are undesirable. In that case the discussion could be brought further by adding to Nyholm's claim that love pills are undesirable an explanation of why exactly that is so. Either way, the Crucial Distinction is clearing up a possible confusion in the discussion about love enhancement, for example when Savulescu et al. refer to the discussion between Nyholm and Naar and draw on Naar's response for their argument (Earp, Sandberg & Savulescu, 2016).

Concluding discussion: love, freedom and commitment

Taking the love pill isn't necessarily undesirable when it facilitates loving attachment in general. However, if the love pill is needed to create or sustain loving attachment for a particular person, taking it is undesirable. We would find it problematic if someone needed a love pill to facilitate love for *us in particular*, while falling relatively easily in love with others. We would find it less problematic if someone needed a love pill to facilitate *love* for us and is, without it, not capable of feeling love in general.

Why is there an evaluative difference between the two ends for which one might take a love pill? I shall not attempt to offer a complete theory of this in the present paper. However, I find the following possible explanation to be worth exploring further. It could have something to do with the idea that lovers are typically thought to have free will to some extent, or at least the ability to commit or to not commit to their loving relationship. As Michael Kühler writes, quoting Erich Fromm, “[t]o love somebody is not just a strong feeling—it is a decision, it is a judgment, it is a promise” (2014). Similarly, Dylan Evans writes that, “[a]lthough people typically want

commitment and fidelity from their partners, they want these things to be the fruit of an ongoing choice, rather than inflexible and unreflexive behavior patterns" (2010, p. 82). It is surely not the case that love only consists in a loving commitment that is the result of a free or ongoing choice. However, as the just-cited authors note, it is very plausible to think of this as one key aspect of love, as we ordinarily conceive of it. Why is this relevant to the present discussion? The idea is that we must have some choice to commit to a relationship with a person; and if we take a love pill that determines whom we love we are deprived of this ability and the lover becomes more like a pre-programmed robot, or a cyborg human that is remote controlled (Nyholm & Frank, 2017).³⁴

What determines the object of our love? Although many factors such as luck, proximity and a lot of (other) facilitating factors can be of influence, I believe there is always some (minimal) rational thought involved on the side of the lover. Even without being given a complete and detailed theory of how love and rationality are related, most people could concede that human lovers, as rational beings, can reflect on reasons to love someone. We can reflect on what we value as beautiful or important. This reflection can guide us in choosing or not choosing a person as the object of our love, even when for example facilitators like wine make us (temporarily) judge otherwise. The love pill as facilitator does not deprive us of our reflecting thought. To secure the final value that we attribute to love, the lover's autonomy to commit or not commit to a loving relationship should not be completely bypassed by technology. But some technologies might be able to do exactly just that: they could deprive us of reflecting thought in love. Technology that is able to activate the right regions of the brain in the right manner at the right times, deprives us of our reflective thought we normally have about the people around us.

Some questions still remain. We can see that we still have some reflecting ability when drinking a glass of wine (even when we come to realize these reflecting thoughts only later, regretting our actions of the night before) and we can also see that we could be deprived of this reflecting ability when our brain gets a much more detailed impulse. However, it remains unclear where exactly the line is between the coarse-grained effects of facilitators and the

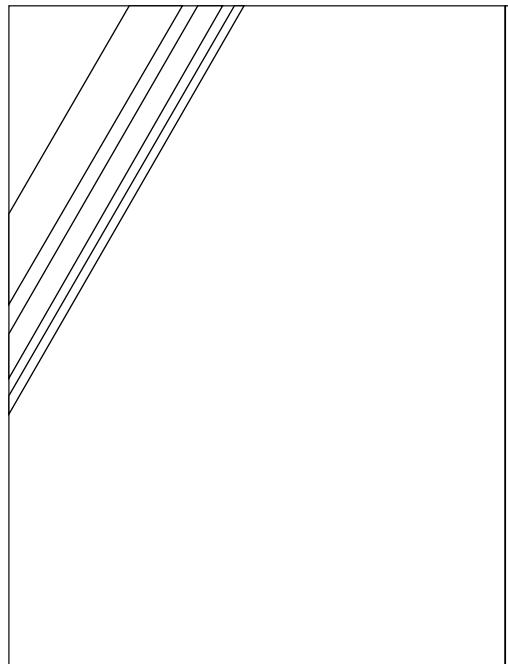
more fine-grained effects of 'determinators' that deprive us of reflection. Another possible comment could be that the love pill might also *provide* the lover freedom, instead of only depriving him of it. One might say that when deep brain stimulation is used to get rid of a depression, a patient might be more free with the treatment than without it. But we could see deep brain stimulation as getting rid of an obstacle. The love pill that gets rid of obstacles would be a love pill of the facilitating kind, removing some obstacle that hinders somebody from being able to love. Such a love pill would indeed be freedom enhancing and not undesirable. A last possible question worth mentioning is whether we truly have some freedom in choosing to commit or not to commit to a person. Unfortunately that question goes far beyond the scope of this paper. Whether we have this ability, and to which extent, might be worth exploring further. However, we can still conclude that when a love pill *controls* how we think about a particular person, we are definitely deprived of the ability to choose to commit or not commit to a person, which would fail to secure the final value we attribute to love that Nyholm is talking about.

Furthermore, there are questions to be settled partly by science rather than philosophy alone. It is up to neuro-science to investigate whether love pills can realistically be used to direct love at particular persons (the problematic version) rather than merely to enhance loving attachment in general (the less problematic version). Another problem to be further investigated would of course be the application. When is someone not capable of loving attachment in general? In what situations exactly is it justified to take a love pill? Could science help us detect the application criteria? Although these are practical questions that have to be answered in the debate, keeping in mind the theoretical difference between the particular ends we could use the love pill for (as I have explicated in this paper), might give us a better understanding of whether taking the love pill would be desirable.

34 Referring to the discussion in the previous footnote.

4.

The Non- individualistic and Social Dimension of Love Drugs



Introduction

In *Love Drugs: The Chemical Future of Relationships* Brian D. Earp and Julian Savulescu (2020) discuss the moral permissibility of the medicalization of love through love drugs or anti-love drugs. They argue that love drugs may help ordinary couples work through relationship difficulties and strengthen their connection and that it may help others sever an emotional connection during a breakup. Earp and Savulescu build a case for conducting research into love drugs and explore their ethical implications for individuals and society. We sympathize with the authors' ambition to “[break out] of the individual-centered, disease-focused model of modern medicine” (2020, p. 6) and their efforts to look at the effects of drug-based interventions on romantic partnerships. We also appreciate them posing questions such as “how can we overhaul scientific research norms to take relationships more fully into account?” (2020, p. 15). However, we think Earp and Savulescu overlook certain interpersonal and social dynamics when they evaluate the moral permissibility of drugs for *interpersonal goals*, by measuring enhancement in terms of *individual happiness*. When investigating the moral permissibility of love drugs we believe it is important to examine the sophisticated ways in which social norms filter into love relationships and, more specifically, into the interaction that plays out between two people. Our preferred understanding of love as a practice (see section ‘Love as a practice’) invites such a broad evaluative examination of social and interpersonal dynamics (see section ‘Love as an interpersonal and social practice’). These positive suggestions are born out of critical questions about how the authors conceive of love (see section ‘Love as a psychological condition’) and enhancement (see section ‘Individual happiness versus moral and social progression’).

Love as a psychological condition

Earp and Savulescu state that they do not want to give a single definition of ‘love’, because they don’t want their analysis of particular cases to depend on which theory of love you happen to agree with (2020, p. 19). We agree that it would be impossible to give a definition of what love is. We also agree that love has a dual nature as both a biological and psychosocial phenomenon. But we want to add that also the concept ‘love’ has a dual nature: it combines

Abstract: This paper argues that in *Love Drugs: The Chemical Future of Relationships* Brian D. Earp and Julian Savulescu (2020) underplay the importance of the interpersonal and social dimensions of love, because they measure enhancement in terms of individual happiness. Love is not just about our individual happiness because 1) other people are involved and 2) moral responsibilities to them might weigh as much as happiness. To make room for the interpersonal and social dimensions we should not look at love as a feeling nor as an individual concern. We best look at love as a practice that focuses outside the self. Like Iris Murdoch (SOG) has argued, love should be seen as an opening up to anything beyond our ego. When this practice of self-transcendence is in itself characterized as a movement towards moral progress, as it is in Murdoch’s framework, it offers us alternative criteria to measure love drug induced enhancement. This paper places Murdoch’s useful concept of love within a social context with contingent yet influential power relations which force us to reflect more deeply on the interpersonal and social dynamics of love before establishing the role that love drugs could play as a facilitator in the movement towards moral progress.

In this dissertation this article is referred to as ‘LD4’.

This article appeared as:

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features of descriptive and evaluative notions. Since this aspect of the use of the term ‘love’ is not discussed in the book, a methodological question remains unaddressed: do the authors work with a descriptive understanding of love (what people think love is) or with a normative conception of love (how we should think about love)? As we will go on to explain, Earp and Savulescu seem to switch between these two approaches, despite their intention to stay out of normative debates on what love should be.

In the beginning of the book the authors talk about correspondence with a woman named Sofia. Sofia is requesting an anti-love drug, to get rid of the attachment bond between her and her oppressive and misogynistic partner: “Sofia knew she needed to get out of the relationship but her heart kept saying no” (2020, p. 9). Those who are saying that Sofia could not have experienced real love (because she was in an oppressive relationship) adhere to a normative definition of love: the concept should be reserved for relationships that are essentially positive, good or healthy. Earp and Savulescu state they have no problem with “people who want to use ‘love’ in this restricted way” (2020, p. 10), but argue that they will not adhere to such a normative stance because of the risks: “Once we start defining for other people what love is, even overriding their personal judgments, we can slip into a narrowminded and paternalistic way of thinking that discounts their lived experiences” (2020, p. 10). Normative theories run the risk of being immoral, so they argue, referring to how normative theories of love in the past (and in many places still today) have rendered love between same-sex partners a mistake on the basis of the idea that *real* love could only occur between a man and a woman. The authors’ point is that normative definitions of love often favour the group in power, and their perspective is not always justified (2020, p. 10). Naturally such a normative stance of ‘healthy’ love would have consequences for the ‘medicalization’ of love. Earp and Savulescu therefore opt for what they call a “more neutral or descriptive route, giving wide berth to individuals to feel and conceive of love in their own way” (2020, p. 11). When they are talking about “people’s romantic experiences”, they will let “individuals who claim to be in love [...] speak for themselves [...]” (2020, p. 11). Though we appreciate their willingness to include a wide range of experiences of love in their view, these statements of Earp and Savulescu actually end up with a narrow understanding of love as an individualistic feeling (note that the word ‘individual’ is used twice).

Their choice to be democratic about what counts as love, seems neutral, but inevitably embodies a normative judgment, like all choices do. Namely the judgment that one should think of love as the name for a psychological condition that an individual has self-knowledge of. But it is not obvious that love is best thought of as a psychological condition. It is not even obvious that this is how the word is understood in folk psychology. In fact, there is evidence that people understand the term to be a so-called dual character concept: a concept that encodes not only a descriptive dimension but also an independent normative dimension for categorization (Reuter, 2019). Other paradigmatic dual character concepts are ‘scientist’, ‘teacher’, ‘art’. When applying such concepts to a certain instance, language users will not only check whether certain descriptive features are instantiated (e.g. having the right education, profession, institutional recognition), but also whether an implied ideal is met (e.g. being passionate about truth, being able to convey a passion for knowledge, expressing a deep truth about life...). It makes sense to say ‘technically speaking he is not a scientist, but in another sense he is a real scientist’, whereas it borders to nonsense to say ‘technically speaking he is not a bus driver, but in another sense he is a real bus driver’. The concept of ‘love’ (as opposed to the concept of ‘lust’) is treated in the same way as ‘scientist’ rather than ‘bus driver’, several studies have pointed out (see for example Phillips, 2011).

In order to avoid methodological confusion, it is important that philosophers are aware of this double nature of the concept, and that they *distinguish* between a descriptive and an evaluative way of speaking (even if it is true that these dimensions cannot be separated, in the sense that every use of the term ‘love’ is both factual and evaluative). When the authors say that when someone is unable to have sex or too depressed to care about the feelings of the other person, there is no longer love (2020, p. 60), are they using ‘love’ in a descriptive or an evaluative sense? In the Opbroek study Earp and Savulescu refer to, users of antidepressants self-report significant blunting of emotions, and less ability to care about the feelings of others. But the survey did not ask about their ability to love. So the statement that the use of antidepressants eliminates love is an inference made by the authors, not a factual observation. What if someone would insist that he still loves his child or partner, but is too depressed to show it? What if bystanders disagree about whether they would want to ascribe love to a depressed father? Arguably

some will think it is harsh to deny the depressed father the capacity to love. Others will think it is hypocritical to console the child that his father still loves him while there is no evidence of it. Do we as philosophers then not need a criterion to distinguish the uses that are misled from those that are apt? (for example Hichem Naar, 2013, offers this extra argument when he defends a dispositional view of love). The inference that there is no love when there is no loving behaviour, needs an argument. And without argument the inference relies on an implicit normative understanding of what love is.

Inversely, the statement that displaying loving behaviour (like wanting sex, sharing emotions) is sufficient to conclude that there is love, calls for an argument as well. The authors believe that if a drug makes you want sex, share emotions or makes you want to behave in certain ways, then this is enough to say that you love. Their argument is that if you started feeling and acting more lovingly toward your partner after drug-free therapy, no one would accuse you of being inauthentic. By analogy, if the limited use of a drug in a therapeutic setting also helped improve your relationship, it is hard to see why a different judgment should apply (2020, p. 97). But here is a counterargument to the idea that drug induced loving behaviour should be seen as authentic. We know that alcohol can be of great help in setting off romances. But not all alcohol induced romantic moves are alike. Suppose someone at a bar is flirting with you while being drunk. At this moment they have started to feel and act more lovingly towards you. One could argue that the drug (alcohol) has helped to reveal the flirter's authentic love. But their momentaneous lovely behaviour is not enough to prove this. We should zoom out. Is the supposedly authentic love of the flirter reliable? Is the flirter really focusing on you or are you just another passer-by on which the flirter can focus their feelings and desires? And how do the two of you relate to each other? What is socially expected of the both of you in this moment? How do the social groups to which you belong relate to each other?

The two examples of the depressed father and the drunk flirter show that the application of the concept 'love' is never neutral or purely descriptive. The two examples show, moreover, that the applicability of the concept is not a one man's decision. Perhaps it is not up to the father alone to decide whether he still loves his child. Perhaps the child should have a say too. Perhaps the drunk flirter's self-understanding as loving someone sincerely is not reliable. Perhaps in interaction with the beneficiary of their behaviour or

with bystanders and close friends, doubts can arise about the motives for the loving acts (do they feel guilty, do they need attention, etc...). These social aspects in the correct use of concepts is something that Earp and Savulescu draw attention to themselves when they talk about the *effectiveness* of a drug. Drug-effectiveness cannot be decided, they repeat throughout the book, merely by asking the drugtaking individual how he or she feels (2020, pp. 2, 6, 15, 65). They defend that medicine research should study the effects of drugs on relationship quality as crucial determinants of the effectiveness of a drug. They even suggest to consider the effects of drugs on friendship and other relationships as the focal point or the intended outcome, and not the side effect (pp. 2, 70). They want improvement of people's lives along a relation axis to be the goal of drug-based interventions (p. 2). So they bring relationality into the notion of a patient's flourishing, and hence into the notion of a medicine's effectiveness. It is all the more remarkable that they do not bring that social dimension into their notion of love. When one wants to know whether X loves Y, it is important but not enough to ask X. Nor does it suffice to observe (the absence of) X's behaviour. One needs to pay attention to the interactions between X and Y, as well as to the social norms that guide that interaction.

The authors explain that they take the biological dimension of love as their focus since interventions in the psychosocial dimension of love get much more attention (p. 59). But it is a mistake to think that we can set aside social influences when we talk about love, even if we talk about love as a biological phenomenon. Social norms always filter into the correctness conditions of the use of the term 'love'. Merely identifying someone as 'in love' already activates evaluative assessment patterns, as we explained with reference to the notion of dual character concepts, and these evaluative assessment patterns arguably are socially embedded and historically contingent as we will illustrate in the section 'Love as an interpersonal and social practice'.

Love as a practice

Treating love as a practice rather than a psychological condition makes a difference to how we evaluate instances of love (as enhanced, or diminished). Earp and Savulescu might have recognized 'love' as a practice, when they quote from Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving*. With Fromm they say: love is

“a decision, it is a judgment, it is a promise. If love were only a feeling, there would be no basis for the promise to love each other forever” (2020, pp. iii, 188). Earp and Savulescu agree that there is a hidden danger in the view that love is something that just happens to you rather than something for which you must take personal responsibility, and work on, and try to improve. They ask: “What if to love is to practice an art, as Fromm argued, which requires conscious effort and discipline, as well as knowledge and therefore understanding?” (p. 188). While this is something we might be able to agree on, the subsequent question raised by Earp and Savulescu is where we part ways. They ask: “What if knowing how love works, in other words, right down to the chemicals between us, could help us be better at being in love?” (p. 188). Certainly, knowledge can support love. And love needs effort and work without a doubt. But all depends of course on what is meant with ‘knowledge’ and ‘work’. Earp and Savulescu seem to think that theoretical knowledge of the biological underpinnings, and subsequently efforts to tinker with this biology, counts as the relevant kind of knowledge and work. We disagree, and we are not sure Fromm would agree either. When he calls love ‘a decision, not just a strong feeling’, he probably wasn’t thinking of a decision to take a love pill, because that decision could betray precisely the view he opposes: that love is a feeling that is not under the agent’s control.

It is telling that Earp and Savulescu consider mental health problems like depression and PTSD to constitute a relevant comparison class for love. Depression and PTSD require theoretical knowledge about hormones and chemicals, that allow to work on the neurological conditions. But the kind of knowledge and work involved in love are of a different kind. While depression is clearly a psychological state, it makes sense to think of love as much more than a psychological state. It makes sense to say that one can get better at loving someone, whereas there is no guiding ideal of what it means to be depressed. We think that love should rather be understood as a practice rather than a psychological condition, namely a practice of self-transcendence, or opening up to anything that is outside us. Such a concept of love is particularly helpful since it enables us to look past the problems posed in the previous section. On the one hand it makes it possible to conceive of love as something else than an individualistic psychological state, by incorporating an outward focus in its very description. A practice of opening up to anything that is outside you is non-individualistic per definition: it transcends your individual being. This, in

turn, makes it possible to discuss the social dimension to which we come back in the section ‘Love as an interpersonal and social practice’. On the other hand it responds to the discontent with the behaviourist view of love: love is not just displaying loving behaviour but rather engaging in the specific practice of opening up to others. Both the depressed father and the drunk flirter could engage in it or not. Whether they do, depends on how we understand the process of opening up.

A particular and useful way to develop a concept of love as a practice of opening up can be adopted from Iris Murdoch. For Murdoch, loving consists in looking outside oneself, focusing our attention to the particular and the unique. She holds that to love is to redirect our attention outside ourselves, to learn to perceive the truth about the world and to see what there is outside one (SOG, S&G, E&M). Constantly attending to our individual needs, desires and thoughts alters our perspective on what the world is actually like and blinds us to the goods around us. Murdoch states that “in the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego” (OGG, SOG, p. 51) and love, as focused attention, is steering away from the ego. We are often so much focused on ourselves, our own world of needs, that we are blind for the things and people around us.

Focusing on the particular and unique outside us helps us to transcend our individual selves. Love as a practice of opening up prevents us from falling prey to the dangers of the ego. bell hooks has argued that if we all came to the agreement that ‘love’ is a verb rather than a noun, then we would all be happier (hooks, 2001, p. 4). One of us has argued (Spreeuwenberg, 2021) that this ‘verb’ should consist in a practice of attending to one another. Engaging in such a practice would keep us from being blind to the reality that the people around us have to offer. We would be better lovers, if we would think of loving as a kind of “unselfing” (SGC, SOG, p. 82). Loving in this sense is trying to see the particular and unique beyond the limits of our own projections. When we do not engage in an outward-focused practice, we run the risk of making up fantasies in our minds.

Take the example of Sofia requesting an anti-lovedrug (Earp and Savulescu, 2020, p. 9). The example in the book tells us nothing about the husband besides that he is oppressive and misogynistic. Suppose his name is Donald and that he is either not aware that he is oppressive and misogynistic

or convinced that this is a good thing. In our normative understanding of love we do not want to say that Donald loves Sofia. Donald is not focusing his attention on Sofia and her needs and desires. He might not even be focusing his attention on her experiences or how he comes across. By being blind for Sofia and her needs and experiences, he is able to fuel his own ego with reasons to justify his oppressive and misogynistic behaviour. Donald is living a self-serving fantasy and this fantasy doesn't do Sofia any good.

Breaking free from the self-serving fantasies of others is particularly valuable because this is a recurring theme in fighting for equality: love as a practice urges its addressees to attend to the reality of a certain individual or group, instead of projecting fantasies onto them, fueled by the blindness and egos of an oppressive group or society (Spreeuwenberg, 2021). Murdoch is trying to tell us that it is not (good) love that is blind, but our ego. Love is meaningful to us when we are able to steer away from the ego and perceive the particularity and uniqueness of a person. Love is meaningful to us when it is outward focused and transcends our individual selves. Love should be a non-individualistic practice, focusing us on the particular and unique outside ourselves, keeping us away from our moral enemy. Love should be a practice of self-transcendence, of opening up.

Earp and Savulescu seem to lean towards a behaviouristic concept of love: when someone is unable to have sex or to care about the feelings of the other person, there is no longer love (2020, p. 60). They also argue that if a drug makes you want sex, share emotions, makes you want to behave in certain ways, then this is enough to say that you love authentically (2020, p. 97). But love as a practice is love that can happen in the inner life: it is not something that should be measured by sex, actions or even feelings. Looking, attending and focusing ones attention all takes place in the inner life. Hence, for Murdoch, we can love someone from afar, we can love someone without them knowing and we can even love the dead. Some have characterized Murdoch's concept of love as a way of looking, or a vision (Jollimore, 2011). That is certainly compatible with what she says. But we talk about love as a practice rather than a vision because we prefer to emphasize the active aspect that risks to be overlooked in the perception-metaphor. It does require effort to open up and to look at the world in a loving way. Or as Murdoch says: "Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real" (S&G, E&M, p. 215).

Another difference with the behaviouristic concept of love is that engaging in loving attention is furthermore an *endless* task. This practice of self-transcendence is in itself characterized as a movement towards moral progress: Murdoch's concept of loving attention is a concept of progression (IP, SOG, p. 23). Murdoch argues that moral tasks are characteristically endless, not only because, within a concept, our efforts are imperfect, but also because as we move, really look and open up, our concepts themselves are changing (IP, SOG, p. 27). Love is getting to know an individual and this is not something that can easily be fixed by merely looking at the 'chemicals between us'. We should not look at love as the sole expression of love in forms of sex and feelings. Engaging in loving attention, focusing on the particular and unique beyond our ego, is engaging in moral activity. It is not the facts, the outer activity or mental concepts that can be analysed that matter morally. It is the inner activity, the effort of directing our attention on individuals, of obedience to reality outside us as an exercise of love. By looking outside ourselves we are escaping our moral enemy. Love as a practice of self-transcendence is in itself characterized as a movement towards moral progress.

Love as an interpersonal and social practice

We suspect that Earp and Savulescu underestimate the sophisticated ways in which social norms filter into love relationships and into the interaction that plays out between two people. One explanation for this oversight might be that Earp and Savulescu focus on love as a psychological condition, rather than a practice or an activity that takes place in a social arena between at least two people.

The recognition that society has an influence on what we think love is (or should be) is in itself fairly uncontroversial. More contested, but argued by many love-scholars, is that the very idea that there is something like 'romantic love' is a construction. Critics of modernity, capitalism, and patriarchy (e.g. Illouz, 2013) but also philosophers of emotion (e.g. Solomon, 1988) have argued that the notion of romantic love is 'an invention', or the product of specific social modern institutions and practices. Earp and Savulescu object and assure us that romantic love is *not* a western invention (2020, p. 19). Evolution selected for the mechanisms of lust, attraction and

bonding that underpin the social practice of romantic love, and thus it has been around as long as *homo sapiens* exists. But when they list three features of the contemporary western conception of love (2020, p. 20), they come very close to the characterization of what Solomon calls Romantic Love as invented during modernity. For example the feature of ‘being made for one another’ cannot have been a feature of the social expression of lust, attraction and bonding during the Middle Ages, where marriages were economic transactions and there was no room to explore individuality and autonomy in the same way as during modernity. Whether one wants to call love in the Middle Ages romantic love or find that anachronistic, might seem a verbal dispute. But the point is that not paying close attention to the historical background of romantic love as we know it, is not without risk. Because it leads to a plea for love drugs without a critical analysis and rethinking of the framework within which the drugs are created, distributed and used. And this is not without risk, as we will show in this section.

In chapter 11 Earp and Savulescu do realize the difficulty of having to calibrate between individual happiness and social progress. They eloquently describe the concerns, and make an interesting parallel between aesthetic surgery and love drugs. But we think they underestimate the message that is built into their defence of the distribution and use of love drugs: this message is one of implicit reinforcement of established norms. They seem to think that it is possible to fight at two fronts: to make individuals happy by helping them to conform to social norms and to fight against the oppressing social norms that stand in the way of this individual happiness. They argue, for example, that surgeons could perform cosmetic surgery, while actively fighting the beauty norms such that they would no longer be asked to perform these operations (2020, p. 169). This strikes us as naive. More importantly, there is a disanalogy between cosmetic surgery and love drugs: the latter are not common practice yet. While cosmetic surgery due to unrealistic beauty standards will not go away anytime soon, MDMA-assisted couple therapy is not widely adopted yet. The authors think that society is on a fast track to a drug revolution, and that substances will be used more and more to help people improve their lives (2020, p. 6). But should we hasten this process? Should we, as philosophers and as citizens, legitimize the use of love drugs well knowing the non-ideal societies in which they will be used?

Love relationships always take place in a particular society with a particular history, imbued by particular norms and expectations. Hence social surroundings affect the decision to take love drugs. In Chapter 11 the authors pay explicit attention to this complicating factor. They refer for example to feminist authors like Julie Bindel who refuse to have romantic relationships with men and call for all feminists to embrace lesbianism as a matter of political necessity and philosophical purity (p. 166), similar to what Marilyn Frye writes about separatism (1983, pp. 95-108). Earp and Savulescu use this example to show that it would be problematic if we were to grant these women access to HCT (high-tech conversion therapy) to modify their sexual orientation as a way of conforming their first-order desires to their higher-order preferences while sexual minorities, some of whom might sincerely wish to change their own sexual orientation for principled moral, political, or philosophical reasons, would not be permitted to do so. But the analogy seems to miss the point. Bindel did not need a drug. The whole point would be lost if their plea was read as a plea to ‘trick’ yourself into lesbian relationships although your heart went out to a man. The plea was uttered on the assumption that there are good reasons for women to allow themselves to feel a dislike of men. These reasons were supposed to do the work, which would be undermined by taking a love pill.

We think that the plea of these feminists should interest Earp and Savulescu for other reasons. Setting aside the radicality of their proposal, Bindel, Frye and others do convey a more broadly acceptable, minimal message which is that heterosexual relationships are burdened, that men and women in our society still need to learn how to love one another from human being to human being – stripped down from power relationships. Earp and Savulescu might concede the broader point about power and individual suffering, but by discussing it in an isolated chapter that furthermore largely neglects power dynamics *within* love relationships, they do not consider the implications on some of their statements about the value of love drugs and the moral permissibility of taking them.

It would have been interesting for example to bring in ruling gender norms and typical dynamics in a forty-something heterosexual couple (with children) when discussing the example of Stella & Mario. It is said that “[t]hey are suffering a breakdown of their pair bond, part of the attachment system (2020, 101). As this is a fictional example, the authors can stipulate

that the problem is the breakdown of their pair bond. But how would we know in real life that this is the cause of trouble? Given that social norms somehow always play a role in how interpersonal relationships develop it is very plausible that problems experienced by a heterosexual couple resonate features of patriarchal surroundings.

The movie-trilogy *Before Sunrise*, *Before Sunset* and *Before Midnight* (Richard Linklater, Julie Delpy, Ethan Hawke) might serve as a useful alternative example. Although equally fictional as the example of Stella and Mario, this example is more detailed and less tailor-made, bringing it closer to real life. The trilogy is about an American man Jesse and a French woman Céline who meet on a trans European train when they are both in their twenties. They have a one-night stand, and then lose track of each other. They see each other again after nine years and it becomes clear both of them have not been happy in their love lives, partly because of their memory of this one-night stand. It turns out they still connect in the same spontaneous, intimate way as nine years before. They are made for each other, the movie seems to suggest. In the third movie, again nine years later, the viewer finds out Jesse and Céline indeed got married and have six-year-old twin girls. But things are not well. We see them on their last day of a family holiday in Greece, where Jesse enjoyed a writer's retreat while Céline took care of the twins. We see a scene where Jesse discusses ideas for his next book with some male friends, idling on the beach, while Céline and the other wives are inside preparing dinner. Friends offer to babysit the twins for their last night in Greece, and the couple sets out for a long walk during which they fall easily into the pattern of deep and entertaining conversations, their trademark as a couple. But the atmosphere changes dramatically after some small bouts of irritation at what the other says. At one point Céline complains she is exhausted from taking care of the twins, the household and that she misses playing the guitar. Jesse does not see how he is responsible and says that he does not keep her from doing what she wants. Complaints and accusations go back and forth, and reach a particularly low point when Jesse says: "If you took one eighth of the energy that you spend on bitching, whining and worrying... If you put that energy into playing scales, you would be like fucking Django Reinhardt." Céline concludes the fight: "You know what is going on here? It's simple. I don't think I love you anymore." Jesse does not accept that conclusion and tries to win her back, by using his charm. That

is how the movie goes. Now imagine that Jesse suggested that Céline would take a love pill. That would have been outrageous. Even if he suggested that this love pill would be accompanied by couple therapy, it would still be outrageous because it would suggest that the cause of the fading love is biological. Whereas the movie gives plenty of reasons to think that the cause is social.

Earp and Savulescu do not morally evaluate whether *suggesting* that someone takes a love drug is immoral. So they could agree that indeed it would be totally inconsiderate of Jesse to suggest that Céline takes a love pill. Furthermore, the authors rule out all involuntary use of love drugs and anti-love drugs (2020, p. 151); Celine would never have to take the love pill if she did not want to. But such a focus on autonomy relies on a fantasy of autonomy that many do not experience. Autonomy is not a moral good that is equally available for every person in real life. Choices are always made in a social context. A wife might very well choose autonomously to take drugs, without her husband asking her to. But does she have valuable alternatives? Are there exit options? Could she be financially independent? Could she choose to take up another role in the relationship?

While autonomy is equally available in theory, in law, on paper, there is still an unequal division of moral-cum-social goods. When we zoom in on gender for example, our society still carries features of patriarchy. Kate Manne considers in *Down Girl: the Logic of Misogyny* (2017) the concept of a 'human giver': someone who is not privileged in most if not all major respects (like white heterosexual cis men are). The human giver, in the form of a woman for example, is held to owe many if not most of her distinctively human capacities to a suitable boy or man, ideally, and his children, as applicable. A giver is then obligated to offer love, sex, attention, affection, and admiration, as well as other forms of emotional, social, reproductive, and caregiving labor, in accordance with social norms that govern and structure the relevant roles and relations (2017, p. 301). This role of human giver furthermore maintains itself: "Trying to draw attention to it is illicit by the lights of the phenomenon itself, since [givers] are supposed to minister to others, rather than solicit moral attention and concern on their own behalf" (Manne, 2017, pp. 281-282). Misogyny consequently is the hostile reaction women get when they try to step outside the role of human giver. Women are considered 'bitchy', 'whiny', 'nasty', 'shrill' or ungrateful should they state

that they no longer want to prepare dinner while their husband is idling on the beach. If Jesse were to suggest to Céline that she took medicines without self-critically examining the reasons for her unhappiness in the relationship, he would just reinforce the patriarchal structures that allow him to flourish but are at the roots of her dismay.

Earp and Savulescu state an example of Susan and Will in *Elle* magazine, which supposedly shows the positive effects of the both of them taking antidepressants:

Before they got on antidepressants, Susan's tendency to rail at length (about whatever happened to be irking her) exacerbated Will's "extremely self-critical" tendencies: "whereas in her depression she'd tend to lash out, in mine I'd tend to sink inward," he says. "We were heading down a bad path." Now, though, they agree their marriage is much better balanced. Susan's rough edges have "softened," as Will puts it, and with this - plus the boost medication has given his own confidence - he's become more forthcoming: They're able to work together to solve problems. "We really are each other's best partners," Will says. "To call us soul mates I think would be accurate". (2020, p. 67)

In the ideal world – without power relations – this could work out for both Will and Susan and this would be a good thing. But seeing this example in the light of the questions and social mechanisms above, the situation of Susan and Will might be problematic (assuming this is a straight couple of two cis people). Do drugs reinforce oppression here? Does Susan take antidepressants to be 'a good wife', while being a good wife in patriarchal society is understood to be a 'human giver'? Maybe Susan has good reasons to 'rail at length', which means that 'softening' these tendencies enforces the social unequal dynamic between Susan and Will. Will does not need to force the drug on Susan to create a problematic situation. Even if Susan 'voluntarily' chooses to take the drug, this may have been prompted by either Susan wanting to live up to the expectations of a good ('non-hysterical') wife, or not wanting or being able to deal with the burden of the image of an angry, aggressive, shrill killjoy and the hostility that often comes with such an image (Ahmed, 2016; Manne, 2017; West, 2016).

A plea to take power dynamics within relationships into consideration would of course not only benefit women or marginalized groups. In a society where men are trained to be non-emotional 'strong men' and are socially punished for being insecure or 'extremely self-critical' (e.g. Will), one could turn to medicalization of love, but maybe we should leave room for Will and his social environment to investigate Will's reasons for this tendency: maybe both Will and society need to evaluate the situation in function of individual, moral and social progress.

Taking into account the social and historical background against which romantic love is enacted, there is a real question about how we can choose to take love drugs in a justified, lucid way. We are therefore puzzled about the way in which Earp and Savulescu set aside the criticism of high-tech conversion therapy (HCT) by Delmas & Aas in Chapter 11. Delmas and Aas argue that we should prevent HCT from coming into existence, because of power dynamics between minorities and majorities. Since HCT doesn't exist yet (but might become real in the future) Earp and Savulescu concentrate on low-tech drugs that do exist. Low-tech drugs are not successful in really changing a sexual orientation, instead they lower libido. But of course power dynamics play a role here too. So we wonder why the arguments by Delmas and Aas do not apply: shouldn't we equally be concerned about the oppression of minorities? The authors argue that love-altering drugs are already available, and that arguing against their existence is futile (2020, p. 149). But that reasoning seems flawed. By analogy: surely it still makes sense to argue against the use of for example chemical weapons, even though they already exist. There is still a lot one can do to prevent the use of a drug that exists. And it might be the responsibility of ethicists to contribute to this prevention.

Individual happiness versus moral and social progression

If you see love as a moral endeavour and as a socially situated practice, you end up with other evaluative criteria for improvement or enhancement. Because Earp and Savulescu approach love as a psychological condition, they can measure its enhancement (or the enhancement constituted by its disappearance) in individualistic terms. As their emphasis on autonomy underlines, they think that it is up to the subject to decide what will count as

enhancement. We do think that we should offer individuals a more complex and dynamic sense of what enhanced love might amount to.

For one thing, our Murdochian approach of love shows that love is about more than happiness. It is about what is meaningful to you. Loving is opening up for progress, to not get stuck with the individualistic desires, needs and fantasies of the ego. Love therefore is not necessarily about what makes you happy. Perhaps when Earp and Savulescu substitute flourishing for happiness, they intend to resonate with this broader notion of meaningfulness. As they do not give an extended description of what flourishing amounts to, it is interesting to take a closer look at the examples they give. How does flourishing come in when they describe the difficult case of homosexual love in orthodox communities in Israel? Earp and Savulescu show awareness of the social pressures that can affect people's ideas about what counts as proper love. But they seem to accept that repressing homosexual love or frowned upon love or improper love may be the right thing to do after all. We think that is because they use as an evaluative criterion the short term goal of individual happiness. The reason in favour of taking love drugs is that the individual will be happier. But would the authors go further and say that one can *flourish* when oppressing such important parts of one's identity? We think not: while one might be happy one is not truly flourishing.

Secondly, our approach of love is inherently non-individualistic and focuses a lover's perspective per definition on what transcends their personal wellbeing. It focuses their perspective for example on what reality demands of them. To use the authors' terminology of flourishing: we want to point out that it can be conducive to flourishing when people refuse to choose for their personal happiness and rather give their life to reform societies. The point is not that we should frown upon people who do not think this will make them flourish and who choose for their individual happiness. But the point is that flourishing *allows* for such a broad understanding. And that flourishing in any case requires attention to moral duties, regardless of how wide the scope one can handle. Think of the responsibilities that an unhappy spouse has to their children. Earp and Savulescu acknowledge these responsibilities, and even use it as a reason in favour of the use of love drugs as a way to solve what they call "the dilemma of gray relationships" (2020, p. 74). But this is difficult to square with their adoption of the results of a study in *Freakonomics* (Levitt and Dubner, 2014), where it becomes clear that Earp and Savulescu use a much

more individual and amoral sense of happiness. Earp and Savulescu state their advice: when we are contemplating a big decision and have considered every scenario a million times, we should just go for it and make the change (whether it's taking a relationship-enhancing drug or ending a long-term relationship) (2020, p. 50). The advice is based on a study by Steven Levitt in which participants who took life-changing decisions were, six months later, on average much happier than the preservers, the people who did not make the decision and chose to leave their life as it was. Individual happiness or relief or absence of doubt is taken to be the criterion here of flourishing. But this individualistic understanding of flourishing is not transferable to the context of family decisions. It is misleading to use the Levitt experiment in the context of love-decisions. 'What will make me happy in six months' time' is certainly an important factor in contemplating whether one should break up or not, but one should consider other factors as well. There are children and other people to be considered, as well as a longer time frame. Making oneself happy (in six months) is not necessarily always the right thing to do.

We don't object to the use of love drugs, but we think more discussion is needed on the conditions in which the use is justified. For now we have explained why it will not do to measure enhancement in 1) individualistic terms of 2) happiness. By way of constructive suggestion we further propose to supplement the plea for love drugs with the following condition: could the use of love drugs in this case be understood as facilitating the process of opening up to progression?

We do not offer an objective account of what qualifies as progression. As explained in the section 'Love as a practice', whether someone makes progress is not always verifiable or visible from the outside. So progression remains a personal process that, however, pushes a person beyond the ego and the self-centred concerns. Fear is an example of such a self-centred concern, that stands in the way of progression. Earp and Savulescu acknowledge the debilitating influence of fear in love decisions, when they write: "Staying in a relationship out of fear - fear of self-knowledge, fear of change, fear of disappointing your partner, fear of disapproval from society - is rarely a good long-term strategy" (2020, p. 50). We are probably more pessimistic (or realistic?) than them about the chance, in current societies, that people would not be motivated by fear in love decisions. We think that a lot more effort should go into opening up society for acceptance, and even

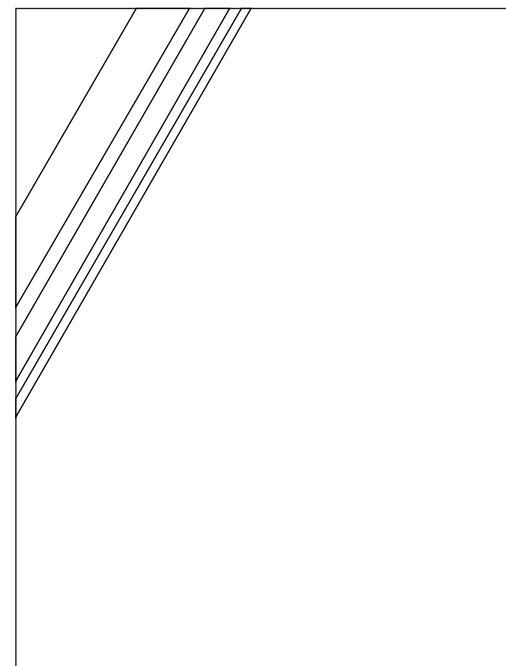
endorsement of a lot more love formations than is currently the case. Earp and Savulescu are not opposed to this social reform, but they think that even then not all obstacles will be overcome. They write: “although political solutions may often be better than medicalization for protecting vulnerable people’s health and well-being, it does not follow that interventions should never be medical. For even in the best of circumstances some people will need the help of medicine in addition to political change, or to cope with such change. And *when that is the case*, the medicine should be available” (2020, p. 185, italics added, similar remark on p. 12). The problem is not only that we have not achieved the best of circumstances yet (and so how could we decide responsibly in favour of the medicine?), but also that using love drugs might slow down the process because it might disguise the truth. So our worry does not go back on the fallacious argument that the use of drugs would be unnatural, but our worry is that the choice to tinker with the biological dimension of love hinders moral progress, because it deprives us both of insights in our personal development (for more on the connection between falling out of love and personal growth, see Lopez-Cantero and Archer, 2020) and of an opportunity to protest social norms.

We agree with the authors that love should not be seen as a given. Love needs work. We wanted to draw attention to the work that love needs by calling love a practice of self-transcendence. Our understanding of love as progression could also offer advice to Sofia, the woman who appears early in the book and in our article, and who wants to *stop* loving her abusive partner. Love as a practice of self-transcendence is in itself characterized as a movement towards moral progress. To focus our attention outside ourselves is an endless moral task (IP, SOG, p. 23). By focusing less on their biological (real) desires and needs, and focusing more on the world outside, people can create room for individual, moral and social growth. Sofia for example would make progress if she recognized the social harmful dynamic that is in place. If an anti-love drug is able to help her do this, this could be an argument for its moral permissibility. However, Sofia should also be able to expand her horizon regarding possible other romantic loves. In this sense an anti-love drug would hold her back in her individual progression. Hence the outcome of our advice to Sofia is not straightforward. Earp and Savulescu appreciate the difficult calibration between individual suffering and unjust social pressures in chapter 11 and argue that ‘in the meantime’ we could

provide people with a drug to relieve them of suffering. Will there ever be progression when we cover up uncomfortable symptoms of problematic standards? We have argued that by underplaying the social dimension of love - specifically by neglecting the power dynamics within relationships - the message of *Love Drugs: the Chemical Future of Relationships* is one of implicit reinforcement of established norms. Only when we have gained insight in the social conditions of our individual predicament, can we do the balancing act of calibrating between individual happiness and individual, moral and social progression.

5.

The Moral Implications of Cancel Culture



Abstract: What are the moral implications of cancel culture? If it is viewed as a means to achieve social justice, we might be more inclined to say that cancel culture is morally good. However, one could argue that cancel culture has too harsh consequences or involves immoral – even hateful – behaviour. This paper proposes that cancel culture is used as an umbrella term for (at least) two different kinds of ‘cancelling’. Cancelling is in the public debate often seen as punishment. Following Linda Radzik’s (2020) objections to social punishment we argue that this kind of cancelling is morally reprehensible. However, cancel culture as an umbrella term encapsulates other kinds of cancelling, too. Many also refer to cancel culture as a phenomenon when someone is being called out or held accountable for their supposedly problematic behaviour. Such cancelling does not need to be punishment, but is often rather an attempt to remove privileged access to the public sphere. In this way, cancelling is used as a tool for redistributing attention: it can (re) claim attention and recognition for marginalized perspectives, by a radical attempt to deny a privileged person access to the public sphere. The paper concludes that cancel culture as a whole cannot be seen as either morally good or bad, because ‘cancelling’ can be used as a tool for both punishment and redistribution. Each have their own moral implications: cancelling as punishment is reprehensible, but cancelling to redistribute attention might be less of a problem.

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Introduction

The phenomenon ‘cancel culture’ has been subject of much public debate. On the one hand it appears to be a good thing related to social and political justice, attacking those who express what the ‘cancellers’ think of as problematic worldviews. Eve Ng (2020) defines cancel culture as ‘the withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues’ (2020, p. 623).

‘Cancelling’ can include people stop buying books or stop streaming certain shows or movies. Literal cancellation can be the effect, too: comedian Louis C.K. saw his show cancelled after some fans accused him of sexual misconduct. Sometimes cancel culture involves an attempt to literally silence a person: when musician R. Kelly got exposed in the documentary series ‘Surviving R. Kelly’ (2019) for the sexual harassment and abuse involving several under-aged women, the hashtag #MuteRKelly was widely spread on Twitter.

Cancelling can be highly effective and severely damaging to the lives and careers of the public figures involved. Consequently, cancel culture as a phenomenon followed a trajectory of being initially embraced as empowering to being denounced as emblematic of digital ills (Ng, 2020). Politicians, pundits, celebrities, academics, and everyday people alike have narrativized being cancelled into a moral panic akin to actual harm, associating it with a fear of censorship and silencing (Clark, 2020).

What are the moral implications of cancel culture? If it is viewed as a means to achieve social justice, we might be more inclined to say that cancel culture is morally good. However, one could argue that cancel culture has too harsh consequences or involves immoral – even hateful – behaviour.

This paper analyses the moral implications of cancel culture. We will illustrate our arguments with a particular cancel culture case, as a thread throughout this paper. We will start by clarifying this particular case to show what the phenomenon cancel culture entails. Throughout the paper we propose that cancel culture is used as an umbrella term for (at least) two different kinds of cancelling. First we explain cancelling as punishment.

Following Radzik's objections to social punishment we argue that this kind of cancelling is morally reprehensible. Second, we explain how a different kind of cancelling is aimed at removing someone's privileged access to the public sphere. In this way cancelling is used as a tool to redistribute attention: it can (re)claim attention and recognition for marginalized perspectives, by a radical attempt to deny a privileged person access to the public sphere. We conclude that 'cancel culture' as a whole cannot be seen as either morally good or bad, because 'cancelling' as a tool can be used very differently, with different ends and consequences. Each have their own moral implications. We argue that cancelling as punishment is indeed reprehensible, but using cancelling as a tool to redistribute attention might be less of a problem.

The case of Carissa Pinkston

At only 20 years of age, Carissa Pinkston seemed to have everything going for her. An international super model on the rise, travelling the world for renowned fashion designer Marc Jacobs and artist and beauty entrepreneur Rihanna's lingerie brand Savage X FENTY. Pinkston could have become the new international modelling superstar, had she not been 'cancelled' over the course of the summer of 2019. The trouble began in May, when a number of transphobic Facebook posts surfaced that Pinkston had made under the name Rissa Danielle. On May 23 she wrote:

Being transgender does NOT make you a woman. It makes you simply transgender. (Hermstad, 2020)

Pinkston had deleted the posts, however, screenshots of her remarks began circulating widely on social media a few months later. Within a short amount of time the posts had gotten attention from a wide amount of people, leading to famous Twitter users with a large following retweeting images of Pinkston's posts. "It started to spiral out of my control", Pinkston later reflects (Hermstad, 2020). People started to call her transphobic. Elite Model Management, the company that represented Pinkston at the time, consequently brought her back from a job in Japan and fired her two weeks later. The supermodel on the rise was now suddenly without a job and under massive scrutiny. The storm did not die down. In what Pinkston later calls

the result of "taking some really bad advice" (Hermstad, 2020), she tweeted another post that caused even more controversy:

I wasn't ready to come about it yet but today I got fired and I've been receiving hate mail and death threats ever since so I'm being forced to tell the truth. I'm Transgender. I transitioned at a very young age and I've lived my Life as a female ever since. It's been very hard to keep this secret but what I said about Trans-Women is a direct reflection of my inner securities and I have since come to realize that I am a Woman. WE ALL ARE! (Hermstad, 2020)

Pinkston is not a trans woman. "I did it out of spite, 'cause I was upset that [...] transgender people called the agency and got me fired", Pinkston later said when she appeared as a guest on the Dr. Phil show (Hermstad, 2020). A week after her false coming-out, she admitted publicly in a tweet, that she had lied about being trans. Online commentary increased rapidly, and the fact that Pinkston kept defending herself did not diminish it. Pinkston was announced '#cancelled' by many social media users. Several trans people and others supporting the trans community called out her behaviour. Model Aaron Philip, who is openly trans herself, tweeted:

imagine being a model who got exposed for being a raging transphobe/saying extremely transphobic shit in the past and then resorting to LYING ABOUT BEING TRANSGENDER ONLINE FOR CLOUT IN ATTEMPT TO SAVE YOUR CAREER....? [...] (Philip, 2019)

There were much more hateful comments, too, according to Pinkston. The hate mail and death threats reportedly got significantly worse. The online commentary had "huge consequences" and had "affected her life" (Hermstad, 2020). On July 26 Pinkston eventually apologized in a tweet for any transphobic remarks she had made. The tweet ended with an appeal to understand her learning process:

[...] I'm only 20 and I'm human. I make mistakes but I refuse to let them define me. I hope you all can forgive me and move on from this incident and I'm not a coward. I'm taking some time to reflect on my actions and I hope you all can try to understand. (Hermstad, 2020)

All her posts have since been deleted, but screenshots of the posts keep surfacing online. In December 2020 Pinkston appeared on the Dr. Phil show in order to “take accountability for her actions” (Hermstad, 2020). On the tv-show she tells psychologist and tv-host Phil McGraw that she wants to make amends and possibly reparations – and move on with her career. “I refuse to let this define me”, Pinkston repeated several times during the interview (Hermstad, 2020).

The Pinkston case illustrates several features of cancel culture as described above: a public figure is being held accountable for statements or actions that are deemed problematic, which has severe consequences such as Pinkston being fired from Elite Model Management, a firestorm of condemnation and indignation on social media. Pinkston notes that the online behaviour has affected her life immensely, ranging from the burden of receiving hate mail and death threats to her international career suddenly coming to a halt: no agency wanted to hire her because of the controversy around her name (Hermstad, 2020). In the following sections we will come back to this particular case to support our arguments. We propose that cancel culture is an umbrella term for (at least) two different kinds of cancelling. On the one hand Pinkston got punished by social media users for issuing transphobic statements. This led to the collapse of her career, which could be viewed as both a part of the punishment as a consequence of it. However, we could also say that by cancelling Pinkston, people were holding her accountable for her behaviour. Pinkston later admits she was in the wrong, apologises and puts emphasis on a learning process. Furthermore, by calling Pinkston out, the trans community did (re)claim attention and recognition, by claiming several platforms to amplify their views. The latter seems more related to social and political justice and less to punishment. Even in this one example, cancelling as a tool is used in different ways. In the following sections we will explain these two different kinds of cancelling and their moral implications.

Cancelling as (social) punishment

Bouvier and Machin (2021) express their concern that social media tends to extremes, moral outrages, lack of nuance and incivility. In this light, cancel culture is often viewed as an immoral practice. One could for example argue that great harm is being done to the person that is cancelled (hereafter ‘one-

cancelled’), or that the person that is cancelling (hereafter ‘one-cancelling’) has ulterior motives, such as wanting to display how virtuous they are. One could also question whether the brutality of the call-out is disproportional to the original offence. In line with recent social media scholarship we can ask: “what are the risks in cases where campaigns seek to cancel individuals in relation to perceived transgressions against specific issues of social justice?” (Bouvier and Machin, 2021, p. 308). What happens when, what may well be good sentiments relating to social justice, are communicated on social media as a violator is dealt with?

Linda Radzik (2020) has connected this online behaviour (“call out culture” and “online naming and shaming”, 2020, p. 59) to her theory of social punishment. One could argue that cancel culture consists of cancelling as a tool to punish someone for a (supposedly) problematic remark or action. If we view cancelling as a person being harmed, or having something taken away from them, it would follow to think of cancelling as some kind of punishment. According to Radzik’s framework, this would be a form of *social punishment*, as there are no legal authorities involved.

In *The Ethics of Social Punishment: The Enforcement of Morality in Everyday Life* (2020), Linda Radzik defines the term social punishment as follows: “Informal social punishments are just non-legal forms of authorizes, intentional, reprobative, reactive harming between people who are not acting within hierarchically-structured institutional roles” (2020, p. 9). Radzik emphasizes that the difference between social and legal punishment lies in the fact that social punishment does not entail a clear, hierarchical, institutionalized structure. While legal punishment involves being punished by a clear authority, for example a public prosecutor, social punishment lacks this kind of authority and hierarchy. In legal punishment, the punishable acts and the corresponding punishment are enshrined in law. In social punishment this is different: there are no clear guidelines for what counts as punishable. There is no clear authority on both what is punishable and what the punishment should consist in. This poses a few problems for cancel culture.

Radzik raises some practical objections to social punishment in general and applies them to “naming and shaming in social media” and concludes that in the light of all of these risks of injustice and mischief, this online behaviour looks like a particularly problematic method of social punishment

(Radzik et al. 2020, p. 59). We will now address some of these objections. They support the argument that cancelling as a tool for punishment is morally reprehensible. The objections Radzik mentions are especially relevant to cancel culture as it is viewed today. Radzik is able to capture what those in the public debate have so often brought up against cancel culture: the lack of opportunity to defend oneself, the disproportionality between the wrongdoing and the consequences of cancelling, a fear of losing freedom of speech. After discussing Radzik's objections, we will shortly illustrate how this captures those voices in the public debate that are opposed to cancel culture as a whole. We conclude that cancelling as a tool for punishment is indeed morally reprehensible.

First, Radzik discusses the lack of authority that is prevalent in cancelling. As briefly discussed above (the difference between legal and social punishment), the absence of a clear, official authority makes it harder for the accused to make their rectification and defence accepted. This objection also includes the fact that in legal punishment, the accused are able to defend themselves before any punishment is issued. In the case of social punishment, and hence cancelling, there is often not a fair possibility for the wrongdoers to defend themselves. A person that is cancelled will not have the same opportunity to be fairly heard (and thus treated) as an accused person in court. On social media, the one-cancelled can be overloaded by hatred and condemnation so that attempts to defend themselves often fall into insignificance. Defences are often overshadowed, and in some cases the one-cancelled will even worsen the situation because of backlash. In the case of Pinkston, the situation got significantly worse when she started to reply to the hateful reactions (Hermstad, 2020), defending her earlier comments.

A second objection that Radzik discusses concerns the disproportionality between the wrongdoing and the punishment (2020, p. 53). For legal punishment, the proportionality of the punishment is an important principle in punishing a wrongdoer. In cases of social punishment, cancel culture included, disproportionality of the punishment as unfair condemnation compared to the wrongdoing can be a tremendous problem as there is no authority involved. As Radzik states, online naming and shaming does not lend itself to much nuance (2020, p. 53). Hence, social punishment lacks clear rules which protects a wrongdoer against disproportional consequences. In

the case of Pinkston we can ask ourselves whether it is fair and proportional for her to be receiving death threats over transphobic posts on the internet. In cancel culture, the condemnation of a single wrongful action may lead to harmful punishment of the one-cancelled.

This can lead to another problem Radzik mentions, namely; accumulation of harmfulness (2020, p. 53). Where cancelling does not allow for much nuance and proportionality, there is also often no point of stopping the harm against the one-cancelled. Radzik argues that this can set off a firestorm of indignation, when online naming and shaming becomes uncontrollable (2020, p. 53). Accumulation of harmfulness is a typical problem for cancel culture as it often viewed as a bloodthirsty witch hunt, which is led by an angry mob causing a snowball effect of harm against the one-cancelled.

Fourth, social punishment can lead to unintended consequences such as a chilling effect on speech (Radzik et al., 2020, p. 55). According to Radzik, social punishment may in some cases lead to consequences that bring more harm than good. It not only tends to inspire backlashes, but it can also cause people to decide to not express themselves at all because of the risk to be publicly shamed (2020, p. 55). This might lead to mitigation of our freedom of speech and the loss of benefits of the moral discourse.

These objections and particularly those concerning a fear of speaking out, have been a popular argument against cancel culture in public debate. In July 2020, *Harper's Magazine* published 'A Letter on Justice and Open Debate' also known as 'the Harper's Letter'. The letter was drafted by five people as a defence for freedom of speech and was signed by 153 scholars and writers, including academics of Princeton University and Harvard University amongst others. They object to cancel culture and refer to "an intolerant climate" and "constrictions of liberal society" (Chatterton et al., 2020). The letter conveys exactly those objections that Radzik poses: they deem cancel culture as disproportional punishment and worry that "the result has been to steadily narrow the boundaries of what can be said without the threat of reprisal" (2020). They add: "The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away."

Another objection Radzik raises against social punishment, is the way a wrongdoing is determined in the context of the circumstances. Radzik's point is that we should never value an act independent from the circumstances. Pinkston makes this objection herself when tweeting that she is "only 20",

referring to her young age and that she is in a learning process. She asks of the one-cancelling to take these circumstances into consideration, asking to not be too hard on her.

Besides these *consequences* of cancel culture, one might also see problems in the *intention* of the one-cancelling. According to Radzik, a more general problem with social punishment is that it is often driven by retributive motives (Radzik et al., 2020, 26). The retributivist view holds the idea that wrongdoers have to be punished for the sake of suffering, in order to ‘get what they deserve’. It is a repugnant bloodthirsty view as it makes suffering an intrinsically valuable goal the punishment (Radzik et al., 2020, p. 26). Cancelling as a tool for punishment may sometimes seem to revolve around retribution, i.e. trying to get even with the wrongdoer. It could be understood as the ‘eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth’ principle, where the punishing party thinks the wrongdoer should be harmed himself. In the case of Pinkston, people expressed to be happy that her career was over and that they enjoyed the fact that now Pinkston was the one that suffered (Hermstad, 2020). This might be an additional reason why cancel culture is viewed by some as a bloodthirsty endeavour, a witch hunt.

A final relevant objection to social punishment, also related to intention, is the vulnerability of ulterior motives (Radzik et al., 2020, p. 54). Radzik argues that a punisher should always morally pressure the wrongdoer to make amends, but that their motives are often different in reality (2020, p. 54). The ulterior motives objection describes the idea that the motives of the one-cancelling are not always focused on redemption, but on showing off their own virtue in pointing at someone else’s vices. In the case of cancel culture as social punishment, we can draw an interesting parallel with the idea of moral grandstanding by Tosi and Warmke (2016, p. 210). Moral grandstanding holds the idea that an agent wants to be recognized as a virtuous person by other members of the moral community. Tosi and Warmke claim that moral grandstanding is a harmful endeavour for the public moral discourse, as it is a self-aggrandizing, self-promoting vanity act (2016, p. 211).

Applying Radzik’s objections for social punishment to cancel culture as a phenomenon, we can see the moral dangers of cancel culture. We conclude that cancelling as a tool for punishment is indeed morally reprehensible. This theoretical elaboration explains often heard arguments against cancel

culture in the public debate. However, in the following section we will show that all that is referred to as cancel culture in the public debate, does not always consist in punishment. Cancel culture as an umbrella term encapsulates other actions, too. Cancel culture is also referred to when people are calling someone out and hold them accountable for their behaviour. This is not the same as using cancelling as a tool for punishment and thus Radzik’s objections would not hold. Not all uses of cancelling as a tool are as problematic as sketched above. In the following sections we analyse this ‘call out’-part of cancel culture and how its moral implications diverge from cancelling as a tool for punishment. We conclude that cancel culture as a whole cannot be seen as either morally good or bad, because it consists of different kinds of cancelling with each their own moral implications. Cancelling as a tool for punishment is reprehensible, but a different kind of cancelling might be less of a problem.

A different kind of cancelling: removing privileged access

Cancelling does not need to be used as a tool for punishment. It can also be used as a helpful tool for a collective of typically marginalized voices to call out and express their censure of a powerful figure. Cancelling a person, place, or thing has its origin in queer communities of colour (Clark, 2020). Black Twitter – the meta-network of culturally connected communities on the microblogging site (Clark, 2015) – made the language of being cancelled into an internet meme (Shifman, 2013). Later, the #MeToo movement, aiming for exposing the scope of sexual harassment and assault, “turbocharged cancel culture” (Ng, 2020, p. 623): former film producer Harvey Weinstein did not have the social media profile to be dramatically cancelled, but a number of subsequently accused figures did, such as comedian actors Louis C.K. and musician R. Kelly.

We can situate cancel culture as a phenomenon within the Habermasean concept of the public sphere (1989). Jürgen Habermas’ notion of the public sphere must be understood as an idealized public sphere: a realm of our social life which functions as a public discussion arena that is open to ‘all’ as opposed to private affairs (Habermas, 1989, p. 27). This concept describes a form of the public sphere that is accessible for everyone, but critics (e.g. Fraser, 1990) have argued it is merely an idealized view as access to the

public sphere is limited to the bourgeois. Sociologist James Davison Hunter declares that “public discourse is a discourse of elites. [...] The power of culture is the power to define reality, the power to frame the debate, and that power resides among the elites” (1991). Access to the public sphere is thus limited to those with privileges.

We argue that cancelling can also be used as a tool to *remove someone's privileged access* to the public sphere. We agree with media studies scholar Meredith Clark (2020) that any examination of cancel culture must begin with an analysis of the power relations by which it is defined. Since social media is extremely accessible in comparison with (earlier) forms of access to public discourse, one might argue that the Habermasean concept and its critique of being elitist might not apply here: how can one have privileged access to the public sphere if virtually everyone with an internet connection can enter this new public sphere?

However, we can understand privileged access as the epistemic authority that some people have, as their voices are heard more frequently or taken more seriously than others, more marginalized voices (Fricker, 2007). Miranda Fricker argues that statements by members of particular groups are systematically neglected or discredited, for example when negative social stereotypes are associated with them (2007). On the other side of that coin are those who have epistemic privilege, are being listened to, followed, liked and retweeted. While Fricker is mostly referring to social identities (e.g. gender or race), there seems to be an important additional dimension to this when considering cancel culture. Fame and celebrity ensure privileges: people are put on a pedestal. Celebrities have a large audience and enjoy greater epistemic authority than the non-famous, all other things being equal (Archer et al., 2020). Celebrities' access to the public sphere is not limited to social media, of course: celebrities like Pinkston are given attention by news outlets and are invited for tv-shows. Privileged access to the public sphere can thus both be seen as *literal* access as *epistemic* access.

Cancelling consequently can be viewed as an attempt to remove (or lower) this pedestal. Cancelling is, as Clark puts it: “a choice to withdraw one's attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time and money” (2020, p. 1). Social media as the public sphere allows millions of everyday people to “leverage networked collectivity and

a sense of immediacy to demand accountability from a range of powerful figures” (Clark, 2020, pp. 3-4). The aim of cancelling is that these powerful figures should no longer be looked at as (epistemic) authorities, but as people with problematic views.

While the above analysis of cancel culture focuses on the one-cancelled, Hannah Arendt's concept of the public sphere adds another perspective to this, which focuses more on the one-cancelling. In *The Human Condition* (1958) she describes the public sphere as a place for human flourishing: a shared space where people can meet and discuss topics they deem important. In the public sphere people can express their beliefs and make themselves be seen as an individual: show who they really are (Arendt, 1958, p. 41). Mutual recognition among these individuals in the public sphere can trigger political activity.

There has been much scholarship that has celebrated the potential of social media in democratisation and social justice. Because of social media we are allowed to hear the stories of marginalized people, formerly lacking a platform to speak (Castells, 2015). Consequently, we can become more aware of injustices that are being done to them. In line with Arendt, Alexey Salikov (2018) discusses how social media as the new public sphere functions as a breeding ground for online activism (pp. 89-90). Marginalized people now have access to several platforms with a worldwide audience where they can address what concerns them. They are not only able to be heard, but also to share their ideas and mobilise themselves and others. Bouvier and Machin (2021) note that “hashtags such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter are some of the high-profile cases bringing formerly more concealed social injustices into open view”. If we think about mainstream news media as communicating elite ideologies top-down into society (Van Dijk, 1998), social media allows voices from below to speak back (Clark, 2020). There is potential to challenge problematic views or ideologies that are carried in the mainstream news media. The callout on social media platforms such as Twitter is a form of activism undertaken voluntarily to protect the particularly vulnerable in online spaces (Nakamura, 2015). We can view some cases or actions within cancel culture in this light: people can express their discontent or aversion against privileged public figures, when those figures express problematic views. Social media allows people to actively express they are against the ideas of this public figure.

We have now looked at cancel culture through critiques of Habermas' notion of the public sphere which reveal the public sphere as more accessible to the elite, adding to this notion of access Fricker's theory of epistemic authority. Furthermore, we looked at Arendt's concept of the public sphere as a breeding ground for political activity, and recent (social) media scholars' accounts of these platforms' ability to amplify (previously) marginalized voices. By doing so, we propose that cancelling can also be used as a tool to reduce someone's epistemic authority and privileged access to the public sphere, as opposed to the bloodthirsty witch-hunt it is often conceived as. Reducing someone's epistemic authority and privileged access to the public sphere in turn reduces their ability to issue any other statements that are seen as problematic by the one-cancelling. In the following section we will discuss the moral implications of this kind of cancelling.

Punishment vs. redistribution: the case of the privileged

We agree with Radzik that there is no moral value in punishing a wrongdoer for the sake of punishment. Similarly, if the one-cancelling does so out of ulterior motives such as moral grandstanding, we would not categorize such a practice as morally good or permissible. If the one-cancelling is cancelling for the sake of punishment or out of selfish interest, cancelling is indeed morally wrong. We understand that in light of using cancelling as a tool for punishment, 'cancel culture' as a phenomenon receives many critiques in the public debate.

However, in the previous section we have showed that cancel culture as a phenomenon includes different kinds of cancelling. Cancelling does not need to be used as a tool for punishment, but can also be used as a tool for removing privileged access. We think that cancel culture as a whole is often wrongfully viewed as solely retribution or selfish interest. Not all kinds of cancelling have the intention to punish or seek out self-promotion. One *could* have these intentions, but it is not a necessary condition for all actions that are grouped under 'cancel culture' by the public debate. Critics of cancel culture as a phenomenon often underestimate that cancelling as a tool can be a way for marginalized groups to speak up and call out. Of course, such actions have different moral implications than punishment. We argue that cancelling as a tool to remove privileged access might be less problematic.

One could argue that removing privileged access to the public sphere is in itself punishment, and thus, following Radzik's objections, problematic. They might view the removal of privileged access to the public sphere as a harm, or having something taken away from them and conclude that cancel culture as a whole is a form of punishment. We propose, however, that removing privileged access should rather be seen as a *redistribution of attention*. Viewing cancelling in this light, the cancelled are not being denied something to which they are entitled. An analogy might demonstrate the argument: a rich person might complain that they are being punished by high tax rates. However, it is wrong to view this as a form of punishment, as it is simply a form of redistribution of resources. One is aiming at equality instead of punishment.

Scholars have shown the link between 'callout culture' and marginalized groups. E.P. Johnson describes the practice as an "indigenous expressive form" particular to the Other (2011, pp. 434, 437, and 443). Clark writes that the practice "has been perfected by Black women, like our grandmothers, who let us know what they see, even if they don't directly say it; minors deprived of a sense of agency, who quickly learn how to detect and name adults' ulterior motives; and queer folk whose first line of defense is withering critique" (2020, p. 2). Furthermore, Clark similarly links cancel culture to the attention economy and describes why the privileged might view cancel culture as a practice that takes something away from them:

In their attempt to separate Black discursive accountability praxes—calling out, reading, and cancelling—from their origins in the creative spaces occupied by the oppressed, and reposition them as a threat to their real and aspirational peers, elite public figures fall victim to their own worst fears: a realization that the social capital they've worked so hard for is hyperinflated currency in the attention economy. (2020, 4)

Without using our proposed terminology of redistribution, Clarke describes cancelling as a tool for marginalized groups to focus attention on incidents that previously would not have been considered substantive enough to get attention by mainstream media: "Black Twitter's hashtag-driven discussion of these incidents, push the ever-present issue of everyday racism to the top of the news media's agenda" (2020, p. 3). She notes that the rapid

mobilization in digital resistance and accountability practice among otherwise disempowered peoples “compel us to identify who or what defines the disputed concept of the public sphere, who sets the rules of engagement, and thus what is considered ‘talking back’ to dominant discourses” (2020, p. 3).

Several of the Harper’s letter signatories have been at the centre of this redistribution of attention. They critique cancel culture as a whole, focusing on disproportional punishment and a fear of speaking out as a consequence. Clark argues that framing cancel culture in this way has found utility among those who wish to quash any attempts to critique their social position (2020). Accountability feels like being ‘cancelled’, when you have experienced a world that has enabled you or let you get away with harmful behaviour for so long. The public discussion about cancel culture portrays a battle for attention between those Hunter conceived of as elites – what we have been calling ‘privileged’ here – and everyone else (Clark, 2020). Here the limitations of the Habermasean public sphere concept become clear, which privileges the elite class and allows no room for alternative and dissenting public, nor acknowledges relations between powerful and disempowered groups (Clark, 2020, p. 3; Fraser, 1990, p. 77).

The signatories of the Harper letter seem indeed ignorant about these power relations. They write: “We are already paying the price in greater risk aversion among writers, artists, and journalists who fear for their livelihoods if they depart from the consensus, or even lack sufficient zeal in agreement” (Chatterton et al., 2020). Of course there is a risk for writers, artists and journalists that depart from the consensus, but this statement seems to render all those participating in cancel culture as more powerful figures than the signatories. Of course this is not true: it would be absurd to say that bestselling author J.K. Rowling, who signed the letter, is more vulnerable than the trans women who announce her #cancelled on their social platforms. Rowling enjoys a great amount of privileges that these women do not.

Furthermore, this ‘call out-side’ of cancel culture can often be seen as an *attempt* to deny a privileged person access. Such an attempt from a trans woman calling out a celebrity like Rowling will often not succeed, since this celebrity’s access to the public sphere is enormously privileged. Both the epistemic authority of being a celebrity (Archer et al., 2020), as her privilege

as a rich, white, cis-gendered, heterosexual abled person play a role in her access to the public sphere. After Rowling was so-called #cancelled for her transphobic statements, she still has more than fourteen million followers on Twitter. United States Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tweeted in response to the Harper letter: “People who are actually “cancelled” don’t get their thoughts published and amplified in major outlets [...]” (2020).

Those that denounce cancel culture as a whole problematic, might be unaware of the differences in privilege that exist. The Harper letter worries that cancel culture can lead to a “restriction of debate” (2020), which shows that those signing it might not see that the public debate is already restricted. It is not uncommon for the privileged to believe in a fantasy of equality, while remaining ignorant about the fact that people in reality are not at all regarded or treated as equal. For example, Clark notes that Black counterpublics are conspicuously absent from the American public imaginary, which holds a lofty vision of newspaper op-ed pages, radio shows, town-hall meetings, and the like as forums of debate where a multiplicity of discursive publics are equally empowered to engage in debate and the free expression of ideas (Clark, 2020, p. 2). This simply isn’t the case, as Clark rightfully goes on to argue. Similarly, not everyone has equal access to the public sphere. Coming back to the analogy of the rich person complaining that they are being punished by high taxes, this rich person now has the wrong belief that everyone around them is enjoying similar wealth. For a person having this belief, it is only logical to think it is unfair that they have to pay higher taxes than others. When devoid of the reality of power relations, one fails to acknowledge the experiences of those that are less privileged. One might believe that their treatment is punishment, while in fact this is not the case. Similarly, one might write or sign a letter deeming cancel culture as a whole problematic, because they think of it as punishment, while they fail to see the privilege structures involved, and in turn fail to see that cancelling as a tool can be used very differently.

Specifically in the attention economy, it is not strange that a dominant privileged group is unaware of its dominance. How can a privileged group view the reality of marginalized groups when such stories don’t reach the public debate? Marilyn Frye has called this “the arrogant eye” (1983, p. 70). The power to define reality, the power to frame the debate, resides among

the elites, writes Hunter (1991). It is easy to remain unaware of this power when you are in a privileged position (see e.g. Iris Marion Young's *Five face of oppression*, 2011, or Gloria Wekker's *White Innocence*, 2016). Some forms of cancelling can be seen as a cry for attention, since the dominant view can be ignorant of its dominance. Clark notes that "being canceled – a designation, it should be noted, usually reserved for celebrities, brands, and otherwise out-of-reach figures – should be read as a last-ditch appeal for justice" (2020, p. 2). The accusation of cancel culture as a whole being problematic, much like in the Harper's letter, often comes from a dominant privileged perspective that is not used to hearing voices that deviate from this perspective because this perspective has been the default.

Some kinds of cancelling can thus function as a tool for what Sara Ahmed has called the "distribution of attention" (2016, p. 216), benefitting intersectional feminist or social justice goals. Cancelling can function as a tool to (re)claim attention and recognition for marginalized groups, by a radical attempt to deny a privileged person access to the public sphere.

Viewing cancel culture in this light, we can see that Radzik's objections do not hold for cancel culture as a whole. Take the disproportionality objection, for example. If we declare a celebrity that has issued racist, misogynist or transphobic comments #cancelled, in an attempt to reduce their privileged ability to issue any other similar statements, would that really be so disproportional? One could suggest that the disproportionality of cancel culture does not lie in reducing one's ability to issue problematic statements, but lies in hate speech or bullying. There is no question that such behaviour is wrong. Pinkston should never have received death threats. But such behaviour is not wrong because it is disproportional to the offense, it is wrong because it is wrong (period). Such behaviour does not need to be part of cancelling.

Secondly, opponents of cancel culture as a whole warn us that cancel culture can have unintended consequences, such as a fear of speaking out (e.g. Radzik et al., or the Harper's letter). But when taking privilege into account, we might want to conclude that it would be a good thing for the privileged who take up more space in the public domain, to not just keep taking up space but first listen to less privileged voices that were denied a platform to speak before. Thirdly, the objection of the lack of opportunity to defend yourself does not hold when we take privilege into account. People

with privileged access to the public sphere have ample opportunity to defend themselves.

We can now see that for those who have privileged access to the public sphere, and enjoy much attention in this public sphere, cancelling is not always punishment in the way Radzik describes it. Yes, cancelling *can* be problematic, looking at Radzik's objections for social punishment. However, sometimes cancelling is *not* used as a tool for punishment, but as a tool to redistribute attention. Viewing this in the light of equality and social justice, this seems less of a problem.

Drawing implications: the Pinkston case

We can now draw some implications for the Pinkston case. Was cancelling Pinkston morally permissible? Or should we condemn the behaviour? We cannot view this an 'either – or' case. While we can in theory separate two different kinds of cancelling, this separation quickly becomes blurry when discussing real life examples. Some one-cancellers might have had retributive or ulterior motives, such as virtue-signalling. In such cases cancelling was used as a tool for punishment. Following Radzik's objections, we cannot view such cancelling as a moral endeavour. However, we have seen that cancelling was also used as a tool to call out Pinkston's behaviour. This kind of cancelling can be viewed as an attempt to remove her privileged access to the public sphere, her pedestal coming from being a celebrity and international star on the rise. We cannot say that this entire example of cancel culture was morally good or bad, like we cannot say cancel culture as a whole is good or bad.

In this particular case we can see how cancelling as a tool can be used to (re)claim attention and recognition for marginalized perspectives. The trans community did not only (re)claim attention and recognition by calling out Pinkston on social media. The controversy on social media led to several media outlets portraying the story including voices from the trans community, e.g. the tweets of trans model Philip. On the Dr. Phil show two Black trans women were invited to speak from their experiences and explain to Pinkston why her comments were considered harmful by more marginalized people. In doing so, the trans community got an opportunity to explain why so many people had called out Pinkston. Journalist and trans activist Ashlee Marie Preston explained to both Pinkston and the people at home watching:

"while we do have free speech, a platform is a privilege, it's not a right" (Hermstad, 2020). In an attempt to remove Pinkston's pedestal so that she could no longer issue transphobic statements, the trans community was able to turn the event into attention for the trans community instead of focusing on Pinkston's behaviour alone. When having such an approach to cancelling, we see no moral harm in cancelling Pinkston.

However, this was not the only kind of cancelling that took place. As argued above, there is no question that hate speech or bullying is wrong. Using cancelling as a tool to punish someone is morally reprehensible. Furthermore, we should not be too quick in putting Pinkston in the category 'privileged' and in doing so dismiss all Radzik's objections. How privileged is Pinkston really and how disproportional was the reaction to her behaviour? In this light we cannot condone all cancelling behaviour against her. On the one hand she was indeed a supermodel on the rise, with a great following on social media. On the other hand, as a young Black woman working in the beauty industry, her privilege and epistemic authority cannot be compared to the privilege of Rowling or Louis C.K. We can question how much epistemic authority Pinkston really had and consequently who was calling her out and in what way. Trans model Philip calling Pinkston out is nothing similar to a white cisgender male sending Pinkston death threats. Of course we do not know whether such a thing has happened (i.e. what the identity was of the people issuing death threats at Pinkston), but we do think it important to make a distinction here.

We cannot separate the hatred Pinkston received from her identity. Kate Manne points out roles and standards of Western society, in which certain categories of people – e.g. women – are considered moral givers (2017). A 'good girl' gives, doesn't ask for anything, is expected to be grateful, owes things to others as opposed to being entitled to something – especially 'moral goods', such as attention, care, sympathy, respect, admiration. In such an environment, she is not entitled to her own opinions or stating them on social media. Manne further explains that we must understand misogyny as a characteristic of such social environments, in which women are susceptible to hostility due to the maintenance of these expectations. Moya Bailey coined the term 'misogynoir' to add the relevance of the woman's colour (2021). Misogynoir describes the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience. Race and gender do not play a role separately,

but add up in terms of prejudices and expectations. Consequently, when a young Black woman like Pinkston does not meet these expectations, she receives an amount of hostility that an older, white, male counterpart rarely receives. While we think there is no moral harm in calling Pinkston out on her behaviour and claim attention for the trans community, we still think that the overall hostility against her was disproportional and at least partly can be ascribed to how society treats young Black women.

Furthermore, we want to make a case for allowing room for growth. One could argue that we should consider someone's circumstances and acknowledge they are in a learning process. One could argue that Pinkston is entitled to that opportunity of moral growth. We think Radzik is right in warning us for the lack of understanding for someone's circumstances that might sometimes show in cancelling. But this does not refute our argument. With removing privileged access we are not taking this opportunity away from the one-cancelled. Cancelling as a tool to remove one's privileged access, still allows the one-cancelled room for growth. It is the pedestal that matters here. Cancelling as a tool to remove one's privileged access and to redistribute attention, does not mean that we deprive Pinkston of a chance to learn and grow. Calling out does not mean 'shutting someone up forever'. The conversation that aired on the Dr. Phil show could function as an example: it called out Pinkston on her behaviour, reclaimed attention and recognition for marginalized groups while still leaving opportunity for Pinkston to acknowledge her mistakes and move on. The Harper's letter is right that we should refuse a false choice between justice and freedom, because "we need a culture that leaves [...] room for experimentation, risk taking, and even mistakes" (2020). But many have interpreted this as cancel culture giving us this false choice, while that does not need to be the case. Some kinds of cancelling *can* work towards justice, when used as a tool to remove one's privileged access to the public sphere, without doing this person harm or denying them a chance to grow.

Cancel culture: problematic?

We have showed that cancel culture is used as an umbrella term for different kinds of cancelling. We have suggested that these different kinds of cancelling each have their own moral implications. We agree with critics

of cancel culture that some actions within cancel culture are indeed morally reprehensible. We have first focused on cancelling as a tool for punishment. Following Radzik's objections to social punishment we have argued that this kind of cancelling is morally reprehensible. But we should not be too quick to condone cancel culture as a whole. Cancelling can also be used as a tool to remove privileged access to the public sphere. In this way cancelling is used as a tool to redistribute attention: it can (re)claim attention and recognition for marginalized perspectives, by a radical attempt to deny a privileged person access to the public sphere. Cancel culture as a whole thus cannot be seen as either morally good or bad, because it consists of different kinds of cancelling with each their own moral implications. Cancelling as a tool for punishment is reprehensible, but cancelling as a tool for redistributing attention might be less of a problem.

A remaining objection to cancel culture as a whole could be related to the seemingly individual nature of the phenomenon. If cancel culture is aiming at social justice, why does it target individual wrongdoers? Why does it focus on individuals such as Pinkston? Furthermore, Bouvier and Machin (2021) worry that social media call-out campaigns run the risk of concealing the nature of the very things that they seek to challenge and certainly miss some of their most pressing features in our societies at this present time (308). The danger in individualising problematic behaviour is that we miss the wider patterns of which it is a part. Bouvier and Machin worry that it becomes "a disjointed series of public events" (Lentin 2015, p. 33) and "reduced to a question of individual morality" (Bouvier and Machin, 2021, p. 312; Lentin, 2018, p. 402).

However, using cancelling as a tool to remove someone's privileged access from the public sphere has the notion and acknowledgement of social power structures encapsulated. If cancelling focuses on the individual ulterior motives of the one-cancelling, such as moral grandstanding, we think Bouvier and Machin are right to worry. Similarly, if cancelling is focused on individual retribution for the one-cancelled, we can ask whether cancelling is ever able to discuss wider problematic patterns. However, as we have showed, not all instances of cancelling need to be viewed in this light.

Furthermore, focusing attention on existing power structures and accompanying harmful behaviour (e.g. Pinkston's transphobic statements) often proves helpful to focus on particular cases. As per the feminist slogan 'the personal is political': systems show in individual action. These individual actions give us concrete examples. In calling out someone's problematic behaviour, we can point out individual cases as a window into structural problems. Furthermore, focusing on particular cases might make it easier to (re)claim attention: it is easier to get voices heard and get engagement for a particular case than getting this engagement for the overarching systemic problem. It is only through the particular that we can address some major societal issues. The neutral or supposedly impartial narrative has too often turned out to be the narrative of the dominant perspective, in which marginalized groups were given little to no attention. Using cancelling as a tool to redistribute attention focuses on the particular individual to expose and work towards a solution for structural problems.

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List of publications

The papers included in this dissertation (page references throughout the text refer to the original publication):

- Janssens, J. & Spreeuwenberg, L. (2022). [CC5] The Moral Implications of Cancel Culture, *Ethical Perspectives* 29 (1), pp. 89-114.
- Spreeuwenberg, L. (2019). [TP3] Taking the Love Pill: A Reply to Naar and Nyholm. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 36(2), pp. 248-256.
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Besides the papers that are included in their entirety, I have used material from other papers and from public philosophy articles, essays and a book throughout this dissertation (see footnote 1, 3 and 12 pages 12, 25 and 60). These include the following:

- Bafort, A.S., Claeys, M., Malomgré, K., Moormann, E., Ropianyk, A., Spreeuwenberg, L., Van Puyvelde, V. (2021). What are you reading? *DiGeSt-Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 8 (1), pp. 106-117.
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- Spreeuwenberg, L. (2020). Ook maar mensen. *MegaZeen* 1 (1), pp. 8-9.
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Summary

This dissertation consists of five papers about a wide range of topics: from moral duties to feminist thought and from biomedical enhancements to cancel culture. Love and morality are important concepts in all of them. More specifically: love and morality as inspired by philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch, who argues that loving is what makes us better human beings.

I take Murdoch to debates where she is not a regular guest. In taking her to these different debates, this dissertation not only contributes to theoretical discussions, but also shows that Murdoch's concept of love is relevant for the more practical and everyday questions we have today about loving, feminism and social justice.

The dissertation offers two new perspectives of Murdochian thought. In the first new perspective, I look at debates in contemporary analytical philosophy of love. Murdoch's conception of love has been largely overlooked within this domain: contemporary discussions in analytical philosophy of love miss out on discussing love as moral. I argue that Murdoch's conception of love could offer additional insights about love and morality in these debates. If we open the debate up to conceptions of love that – like Murdoch's – are (at least) compatible with morality, we could have discussions about how loving makes us better human beings. I furthermore argue that the contemporary analytical discussions that do view love as moral discuss a conception of love that leads to love involving egocentric fantasies. I argue that Murdoch's conception of love has advantages over these accounts, for viewing love as a liberation from (egocentric) fantasies.

While the first new Murdochian perspective brings Murdoch into existing contemporary debates, the second perspective is adding a contemporary perspective to Murdoch's original theory. This second perspective takes as its central question: could Murdoch's conception of love make our society a better place? I take Murdoch's theory from her individualistic approach to a more social approach, focusing on socio-political structures. I argue that Murdoch's conception of love is relevant for contemporary fights for social justice. First, I argue that egocentric fantasies are particularly harmful, while focusing on social justice debates, such as feminism and anti-racism. Second, I suggest that Murdoch's conception of love helps us move away from these

egocentric fantasies. Through her concept of 'love' as moving from fantasy to reality, we can come to know the lived realities of others. This move takes Murdochian thought to a different level, incorporating contemporary insights from feminist philosophy, critical theory and social epistemology.

Samenvatting

Dit proefschrift bestaat uit vijf papers over een breed scala aan onderwerpen: van morele plichten tot feminism en van biomedische verbeteringen tot cancelcultuur. Liefde en moraliteit zijn in al deze papers belangrijke begrippen. Meer specifiek: liefde en moraliteit zoals geïnspireerd door filosoef en romanschrijfster Iris Murdoch, die betoogt dat liefhebben ons betere mensen maakt.

Ik neem Murdoch mee naar debatten waar ze zelden te gast is. Door haar mee te nemen naar deze verschillende debatten, draagt dit proefschrift niet alleen bij aan theoretische discussies, maar laat het ook zien dat Murdochs concept van liefde relevant is voor de meer praktische en alledaagse vragen die we vandaag de dag hebben over liefhebben, feminism en sociale rechtvaardigheid.

Het proefschrift biedt twee nieuwe perspectieven van Murdochiaans denken. In het eerste nieuwe perspectief kijk ik naar debatten in de hedendaagse analytische filosofie van de liefde. Dit debat heeft Murdochs idee van de liefde grotendeels over het hoofd gezien: bij hedendaagse discussies in de analytische filosofie van de liefde ontbreekt het aan een besprekking van de liefde als moreel. Ik betoog dat Murdochs idee van liefde in deze debatten inzichten zou kunnen bieden over liefde en moraliteit. Als we het debat openstellen voor opvattingen van liefde die – zoals die van Murdoch – op zijn minst verenigbaar zijn met moraliteit, zouden we discussies kunnen voeren over hoe liefhebben ons betere mensen maakt. Ik betoog daarnaast dat de hedendaagse analytische discussies die liefde wel als moreel beschouwen een opvatting van liefde bespreken die leidt tot liefde waarbij egocentrische fantasieën een te grote rol spelen. Ik betoog dat Murdoch's opvatting van liefde voordelen heeft ten opzichte van deze uiteenzettingen, omdat ze liefde ziet als een bevrijding van (egocentrische) fantasieën.

Terwijl het eerste nieuwe Murdochiaanse perspectief Murdoch inbrengt in bestaande hedendaagse debatten, voegt het tweede perspectief juist een hedendaags perspectief toe aan Murdochs oorspronkelijke theorie. Dit tweede perspectief neemt als centrale vraag: zou Murdochs opvatting van liefde een rol kunnen spelen in het verbeteren van onze samenleving? Ik verleg de theorie van Murdoch van haar individualistische benadering

naar een meer sociale benadering, met de nadruk op sociaal-politieke structuren. Ik betoog dat Murdochs opvatting van liefde relevant is voor een hedendaagse strijd voor sociale rechtvaardigheid. Ten eerste stel ik dat egocentrische fantasieën schadelijk zijn, terwijl ik focus op debatten over sociale rechtvaardigheid zoals feminism en antiracisme. Ten tweede betoog ik dat Murdochs opvatting van liefde ons helpt om van deze egocentrische fantasieën af te komen. Door haar concept van liefde als een beweging van fantasie naar werkelijkheid, kunnen we de geleefde realiteiten van anderen leren kennen. Deze stap brengt het Murdochiaanse denken naar een ander niveau, waarbij hedendaagse inzichten uit de feministische filosofie, kritische theorie en sociale epistemologie worden geïntegreerd in de oorspronkelijke theorie.