

Murdochian Presentationalism

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[Note for reviewers: This paper was the last of three presented during a panel discussion at the SEP-FEP 2016 at the Regent's University in London. My co-panelists were Rachel Fedock (Arizona State University) and Michael Kühler (University of Twente, NL). In the text, I draw on their papers, but my paper should be intelligible on its own.

I. Introduction

When lovers forge loving unions, union theorists think, they form a *we-identity*. The lovers' outlooks merge, future decisions depend not just on their own, but on their shared outlook. Some individual autonomy, it may seem, is lost in the process. Suppose so. Suppose also that love, to be just, must preserve, not entail loss of, autonomy. This, Rachel Fedock suggests, yields the following argument:

P1: Love unions, on union theories, entails loss of autonomy.

P2: To be just, love must preserve autonomy, not entail its loss.

C2: On union theories, love is unjust.

As Michael Kühler argues, union theorists may accept P2, yet resist P1. Maintaining loving unions, they can argue, is a practical task, one lovers can execute justly. Yet how does doing so involve autonomy?

Thinking about how to answer this question, I think, yields a different objection to union views: *pace* union views, in love, identities don't merge. Maintaining love justly does require recognizing and fostering the beloved's autonomy. Yet doing so, I claim, requires the continuous loving acknowledgment of, and response to, the fact that beloveds, *qua* individuals, are *different*.

In this paper, I develop this suggestion by way of sketching a view I dub *Murdochian Presentationalism (MP)*. First, I sketch presentationalism, a view on perception, adding, next, a Murdochian twist. After sketching a notion of autonomy to complement the view, I return to my objection to union theorists.

II. Murdochian Presentationalism

II.1. Presentationalism

Presentationalism is a view of experience and its rational role opposed to representationalism. Approaching union views of loving relationships from this direction is unusual and takes some preliminary legwork. But I think it pays off, so bear with me.

Experience, representationalists think, has representational *content*,¹ which in turn enables it to play its rational role. How? Suppose my experience represents some content, *p*. In response, I may endorse *p*, or reject it, suspecting, maybe, that some defeater is present. Experience's rational role, on this view, is to provide (defeasible) premises, *via* its content, that can justify perceptual beliefs.

This widespread picture is problematic. Representationalists cannot handle pervasive top-down effects on experience exerted by background cognitive states – beliefs, hopes, desires, fears, etc.² Are such effects pervasive? Many philosophers and cognitive neuroscientists claim that they are.

Suppose experience is massively affected by background states. Arguably, such effects can, perhaps frequently will, remain outside the experiencing subject's ken. This creates trouble. If the putative content of our current experience may be variously affected, why should we rely on it?

Even if experience is unaffected by background states, problems ensue. For we can ask: when does its content – *p*, say – justify the belief that *p*? Answer: When we judge our situation correctly and allot the content of our experience its proper justificatory weight. Yet how can we tell that we do?³

The upshot is this: trusting the putative experiential content to rationally guide us seems overly optimistic. Why? Because unbeknownst to us,

- 1) the content could be distorted by background states.
- 2) we might, maybe often do, apportion an incorrect justificatory weight to that content.

In both scenarios, experience misguides us and thus plays its rational role poorly.

Experience, presentationalists agree, plays a rational role, yet it need not hinge on its content. In experience, they think, the things present to consciousness manifest *appearances*. 'Appearances' denote the experience's subjective aspect, experience considered from the subject's point of view.⁴ They can be manifested by environing items, yet also result from other factors, e.g. environmental conditions and subjective features, including the subject's constitution and her mental states.

Appearances, to presentationalists, are *multiply factorizable*.⁵ More perspicuously: there are various ways the world and subjects could be that would jointly manifest *identical* appearances. Different factors, that is, can generate *subjectively identical* appearances.

Accordingly, appearances, considered in isolation, don't reveal what they are *of*. *Pace* representationalism, experience alone doesn't provide subjects with anything to endorse or reject. Instead, presentationalists claim, having certain appearances makes rational certain *transitions*, inter

¹ I henceforth drop the qualifier 'representational.'

² From now on, I drop the qualifier 'cognitive' and take it to be implied.

³ Many further questions arise. For instance: how are we to characterize experiential content and its relation to phenomenology? I do not pursue this here.

⁴ This specification is taken from Gupta (ms.), *chapter 5*.

⁵ See Gupta (2006), chapter 1.

alia, to perceptual judgments. Which judgments? This crucially depends on one's background view.⁶

To illustrate, consider Pia. Pia, suppose, is unfamiliar with the Müller-Lyer illusion. Upon seeing it, certain appearances manifest in her consciousness. As Pia has no reason to suspect any funny business, the appearances, given her view, will make it rational for her to transition to this judgment: "These two lines differ in length."

Contrast Mia, Pia's twin. Unlike Pia, Mia knows the illusion. It is robust; knowing it neither undoes it, nor does it alter its appearance. Accordingly, Mia is being appeared to exactly like Pia. However, the appearance, conjoined with Mia's view, makes it rational for Mia to transition to a different judgment: "These two lines are the same length."

Different views make rational different transitions. How? Roughly, thus: views contain beliefs, yet also, crucially, linkages that rationally link all possible appearances with view-specific transitions to perceptual judgments.⁷ Whenever some appearance manifests in consciousness, the view outputs transitions to perceptual judgments as rational.

Presentationists, observe, can easily handle the two issues threatening representationalism. The second one does not even arise, since experience does not justify beliefs through content. Hence, worries about its justificatory weight are misplaced.

Regarding the first worry, suppose cognitive scientists are correct: background states do frequently affect experience. Such effects, presentationists concede, could modify appearances. Yet views, recall, contain linkages rationally connecting *all* possible appearances with transitions to perceptual judgments. Modification of appearance thus changes *which* transitions the view outputs as rational. Yet experience's rational role – making rational some such transitions – remains unhampered.

To this sketch of presentationism, let us now add a moral, specifically Murdochian twist.

II.2 A Murdochian Twist

Iris Murdoch's central tenet is that moral progress and truly acting well require love, construed as *just attention*. "Love," she says, "is the perception of individuals, [...] the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real."⁸ Love requires unselfing. We must avert our attention away from the self and direct it at others. Truly seeing them, not a caricature of them that serves our ego, requires attending to them unselfishly, justly, i.e. so as to do justice to who they are.

⁶ Henceforth, I drop the qualifier 'background' and just talk about views.

⁷ Views may also contain linkages to other activities, such as referential activities or ostensive definitions (see Gupta (ms.)).

⁸ Murdoch, Iris (1959), 51.

To illustrate, consider selfish Sid. To Sid, others matter only as they affect the pursuit of his goals. How he labels others reflects his selfish needs: *useful, influential, yet exploitable, weak, menacingly smart, or ridiculously stupid*. Surely, in characterizing others, we must use some labels. Yet Sid's coarse categorization transforms, as it were, the individuals he sees into caricatures that reflects his needs rather than who they are. For concepts to become better attuned to what is real and particular, we must *look*. Sid, however, has little motivation to attend to who others really are or to imagine how their actions may look to them. Missing opportunities for refinement, his concepts remain coarse, his vision distorted.

Selfish attention distorts how others appear, selfish views rationally engender transitions to unjust beliefs, judgements, and actions. Conversely, unselfish attention does justice to who others are, to what they believe, what options they can see, how they characterize these options, how they differ. This is extremely difficult. Often, we fail. Progress, Murdoch submits, requires humility and compassion.

'Humility' translates into 'readiness to learn.' Others' perspectives may be blurred, too, yet clearer where ours are murky. If others disagree, we should look again—unselfishly, justly—and learn. Compassion arises from the insight that actions may look comparatively bad to us, yet good to others who evaluatively characterize them differently (and *vice versa*). Ideally, attending to others engenders understanding, which in turn facilitates attempts to help them improve, if, on close inspection, their understanding seems deficient. Such attempts are compassionate, empathetic responses to others, their outlooks, and their idiosyncratic features. They do not primarily serve our own purposes, but the common good, as they enable others to see better and, perhaps, realize that some of their options, if characterized differently, are better than previously assumed.

Presentationists, recall, think that what transitions to judgments—and, by extension, actions—are rational in a given situation depends on views and appearances. As seen, presentationists can accommodate the possibility that top-down effects massively affect experience. To presentationists, this translates into the claim that subjects in identical enviroing circumstances can face different appearances. Differing responses to identical circumstances can be equally rational, conditional on the subject's views or appearances. If so, however, Murdoch's appeal to humility and compassion is proper. If transitions to actions that others make and that I disapprove of may be rational, too, I should humbly consider that perhaps, my own view or my way of attending to the situation are deficient. Disagreement with others should not trigger my blame, but motivate me to attend to them more closely and learn, or act compassionately, whichever circumstances require.

We arrive at *Murdochian Presentationism* by construing the presentationist insight that differing responses to identical circumstances can be equally rational as inviting the Murdochian response that acting well towards others requires that we transcend the constraints of our subjective

rationality and open oneself up to being affected by attending to others justly. Ideally, when we do, we come to see their perspective and the rationality governing it, which engenders understanding and changes how we characterize both their actions and our options to respond. This latter aspect, I urge, is vitally important in loving relationships. Before I elaborate, consider, next, autonomy.

III. Autonomy

What is autonomy? Freedom, perhaps, to deliberately choose between publicly available options for action? To Murdochian presentationalists, this is doubly implausible.

Suppose I want to engage in some action, φ . φ seems attractive to me, yet unfathomable to you. Perhaps the differences of our characterizations can be overcome. Perhaps, after talking and attending to you, I adopt your characterization of φ -ing, or modify mine based on what I can now see.⁹ Yet perhaps not. Resolving differences in our understanding of concepts and in how we apply them as we attend to things can be complicated, lengthy, indeed a life-long task. Just attention is extremely difficult. Consequently, Murdochian presentationalists suggest that given individual differences in view and, perhaps, appearances, options for action are typically not publicly available under the evaluative characterizations that matter to the agent. Indeed, some morally relevant actions are available only to me. Reevaluating others and their actions, for example, is a rather private affair. It involves adopting one idiosyncratically framed characterization over another, previous one. Who, except me, could possibly engage in *this* activity?¹⁰

Further, Murdochian presentationalists submit, in moments of choice, most of the morally important work has already been done. “The world which we confront,” Murdoch claims, is “a world upon which our imagination has, at any given moment, already worked.” Similarly: “we evaluate [...] largely, by the constant quiet work of attention and imagination.”¹¹ To Murdochians, not choice is primarily important, morally, but attention and realistic imagination of others and situations. Choosing may remain taxing in dilemmatic or time-sensitive situations. Yet typically, how we characterize our options already indicates which one is best, and we pursue it almost automatically. In less perspicuous situations, we may need to deliberate, combined, perhaps, with

⁹ I might realize that despite my previous evaluation, the option is not available to me, either, as it conflicts, under the modified characterization, with what else I deem good. Perhaps I will not fully succeed in understanding your characterization – as my attention is flawed or I use the terms figuring in it differently. I may even slightly disagree with you, and still act the way you suggest. Were you to experience an untoward consequence of my acting this way—one I anticipate, while you do not—you might learn from this more than by my repeatedly telling you. If that you do matters to me a lot, I may be willing to pay the price of having to face the untoward consequence. My doing so may be an act of loving compassion. However, it can also be a selfish act, if, for instance, all I care about is the expected pampering of my ego deriving from my being able to tell you that I told you so.

¹⁰ This is one of the important aspects Murdoch’s famous M&D example brings out (see Murdoch (1974), 22).

¹¹ Murdoch (1998), 199-200.

attending to the situation more closely. Anyhow, it is not in choice that our freedom is revealed. The selfish, too, chooses. Yet his freedom appears severely constrained; he cannot see clearly what his options are. He is, in this sense, unfree. Lacking attention and conceptualizing the Good he aims at too narrowly his characterization of his options is unrealistic and distorted.

To Murdochians, freedom is not freedom *to* choose, but freedom *from* whatever distorts our views and blurs our vision—notably: selfishness. Freedom lets us evaluate options clearly and thus do what may in fact be good in a sense that transcends what may initially seem good to us. Let me next combine this view with a take on autonomy as resting on the capacity to bind oneself by norms.

Being bound by some norms—at least implicitly—is essential to intelligibly having views at all. For something to *be* a view, it must be intelligible as forming an interrelated conceptual structure governed by some set of implicit norms.¹² Indeed, we can characterize views by referring to the set of norms that those who hold them are *de facto* disposed to comply with. *De facto norms* need not be explicitly available to us. Some, perhaps, are. Others, perhaps most, govern our judgments and actions implicitly – manifesting, *inter alia*, in how we understand, relate, and apply moral and other notions, and determining what, in any given situation, we consider best.

Conscious and unconscious selfish motifs can affect *de facto* norms and, accordingly, the views they constitute. If selfishness hampers our freedom, affects what we see, our view and, hence, how we characterize our options, then improvement in the dimension of autonomy appears as a modification of how we exercise our capacity to bind ourselves by norms: a modification that minimizes selfishness.

Such improvement is fostered by explication.¹³ Explicating norms increases our semantic and moral self-consciousness. As we consciously endorse them, we are no longer bound by implicit norms, passively, but actively bind ourselves by them – an active, more autonomous exercise of the appurtenant capacity. Second, explication makes norms available for intersubjective refinement as we consider them on individual occasions of joint attention.

Arguably, initially, *de facto* norms are largely due to what psychological and socio-cultural influences are inculcated in us during our upbringing. Explicating them is a social task which requires reciprocal recognition, attribution of motifs and reasons, and, where appropriate, criticism. What our norms *ought* to be, too, must be socially negotiated. In such activities,

¹² It is a very interesting question, albeit one I cannot here pursue, what exactly the structure of such norms minimally needs to be. Perhaps the set of norms does not be fully coherent, norms, in other words, may conflict with each other. I take it, however, that some minimal coherence constraint must be met.

¹³ If, like Murdoch, we want to leave room for the virtuous peasant, we cannot claim that explication is *necessary* for moral improvement. Perhaps, in other words, moral excellence can result from the combination of being very perceptive and having a naturally virtuous and unselfish disposition. I am not sure whether moral excellence requires being self-reflective. In the following, I assume that it does. Yet I trust that my claims could be weakened so as to accommodate the virtuous peasant.

Murdochian presentationalists insist, attention matters. Only attending justly lets us see others, incorporate the valid points they may raise, issue just criticism and compassionate assistance.

The autonomous, then, consciously embraces the increasingly unselfish norms she binds herself by, attends to others justly, recognizes them as pursuing, as good as they can, what good they can see, and responds humbly and compassionately. To her, disagreement with others invites attention and provides opportunities for testing, understanding, and refining the norms she embraces. She welcomes disagreement as potentially revealing distorted facets of her own view, as an opportunity for detecting and overcoming residual selfishness, or for compassionate action to help others see better, explicate, and refine their norms.

Obviously, this is a distant ideal. Just imagine what responding lovingly to violent oppressors would require. Yet the account sketched should be clear enough to provide the resources required to return to our initial issue.

IV. Wrapping up

How does maintaining love justly involve autonomy? Love, I granted at the outset, does not diminish autonomy, but requires it to be recognized and fostered. Moreover, in love identities do not merge. Rather, fostering autonomy challenges us to engage in continuous loving acknowledgment of, and response to, the fact that beloveds, *qua* individuals, are different.

Murdochian presentationalism corroborates that individuals differ in many respects—their views, what they can see, how things look to them, specifically: what options seem available, how they are characterized, and which transitions to judgments and actions seem rational and good.

Certainly, the notion of just attention doesn't exhaust all there is to specifically *romantic* love. Yet it sheds light on what maintaining loving relationships justly requires. Just lovers, I submit, continuously attempt to attend to the beloved justly. As they evaluatively characterize situations and options for action, they acknowledge and incorporate the beloved's view as they realistically imagine it. Doing so, however, differs from simply adopting the beloved's outlook. Neither my beloved's reasons, nor the motifs that may influence her view, perhaps opaquely, need to become mine. Our identities do not merge. Still, as her outlook and her well-being matter to me, seeing and imagining her reasons and motifs affects how I evaluatively characterize my options towards her.

Just attention thus modifies the range of one's options, but also, and crucially, how these options are characterized, what they are perceived to be. Love, so construed, transcends subjective rationality and enables compassionate action. Indeed, being compassionate may require that I refrain from pursuing what strikes me as the most rational option. Perhaps my beloved cannot see what rational merits I attribute to it, would indeed be hurt were I to pursue it. Attending to her and imaginatively anticipating her response to my actions both affects my evaluative

characterization of these options and opens ways for me to respond to her otherness compassionately where her outlook strikes me as blurred.

Generally, then, the just lovers' pledge is to lovingly attend and humbly and compassionately respond to mutual differences and to mutually assist each other in explicating, clarifying, and developing their respective outlooks. Moreover, taking this pledge is not a diminishment, but an exercise of autonomy, a conscious, unselfish exercise of our capacity to bind ourselves by norms. It involves a commitment to making continuous attempts to bind oneself by norms that, if acted upon, are beneficial to both lovers. Lovers must continually renegotiate what these norms ought to be and how to understand and apply them, always with a view to making both lovers more autonomous, their outlooks less selfish, more realistic, and better attuned to what is in fact best.

If just, such negotiations rest on the mutual recognition of the lovers as capable of exercising autonomy, the capacity to consciously and unselfishly bind themselves to jointly negotiated norms, and as being both able and entitled to hold each other accountable. Such recognition must also acknowledge the lovers' individuality. Lovers must remain willing to refine and renegotiate their views, aiming at a joint understanding of what norms govern their views and their relationship—ever-ready to look again, and to compassionately support each other when they fail. Achieving a joint perspective may well be an infinite task. Again, just love is extremely difficult and injustice can enter in numerous and surreptitious ways. But preventing it from doing so by attending to, and responding to the beloved justly surely is an ideal worth striving for.

Murdochian presentationalists dismiss union theories. However, in contrast to the argument we started with, this dismissal does not rest on the idea that *we-identities* are inherently unjust. Rather, Murdochian presentationalists reject the unionist's core tenet directly, i.e. that lovers do in fact share an identity or self. *An contraire*, they insist, lovers remain individuals and being mindful and responsive to her respective individuality is indeed crucial to fostering one's beloved's autonomy. The question, Murdochian presentationalists will ask, is why unionists insist on the notion of 'we-identities', what essential work they think it does. Pending a clear account of it, Murdochian presentationalists will insist that we should do without. That said, perhaps an olive branch can be extended. For if unionists can accept a construal of unions not as involving a merger of identities, but as constituted via a mutual commitment of the kind I have suggested the just lovers' pledge involves, a union view that integrates the Murdochian presentationalist's conception of just love and autonomy may be possible.

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