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Paradox and discovery: Iris Murdoch, John Wisdom, and the practice of linguistic philosophy

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Abstract

This article argues that Iris Murdoch, who was supervised by John Wisdom during her 1947–48 fellowship at Newnham College Cambridge, went on to practice philosophy in a recognizably Wisdomian manner in her earliest paper, “Thinking and Language” (1951). To do so, I first describe how Wisdom understood philosophical perplexity and paradox. One task that linguistic philosophers should take up is to investigate the concrete cases that give paradoxical philosophical statements their sense and to sift the truth they contain from the distortion. I then show how this vision informed his critical reception of Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* as well as his own investigation of the Hidden Stream Paradox. Finally, I trace a similar approach to Murdoch's discussions of a paradox I call the Coarse Net Paradox. Recognizing Murdoch's intellectual inheritance from Wisdom enables us to see a thus-far overlooked connection between Murdoch and the tradition of linguistic philosophy.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Iris Murdoch's place in the history of linguistic philosophy is a subject of debate among contemporary scholars.¹ Making the case that she should be located within that philosophical tradition has meant addressing two related complications.² In her early discussions of the analysis of mental concepts and non-descriptivist moral philosophies like emotivism and prescriptivism, Murdoch is critical of Oxford linguistic philosophers like Gilbert Ryle and R. M. Hare. Furthermore, she regularly criticizes those who practice moral philosophy in a manner informed by Wittgenstein's discussions of mental concepts in the *Philosophical Investigations*. This can give the appearance that she is a critic of linguistic philosophy as such, but only if we ignore the form that her criticism takes and fail to disentangle the positions associated with post-war linguistic philosophy from its methods. When we do these things,

Murdoch's apparent antipathy looks very different; it can be recognized as frustration with philosophers who failed to take the linguistic method seriously—and her own responses to their analyses of mental and moral concepts look instead like attempts to seriously apply it.³

This strategy enables us to disentangle Murdoch's criticism of unserious linguistic philosophy from critique of Wittgenstein's thought. For example, in "Metaphysics and Ethics", she cites Wittgenstein as the author of the increasingly popular idea that the meaning of a word is its use; while she does not reject this idea as such, she views non-descriptivist theories of moral language such as prescriptivism as misguided applications of it (Murdoch, 1957, p. 61). By focusing on "good" as a word that signals what moral choices one has made and what recommendations they would make to others, moral philosophers lose sight of the diversity of moral language use. Two persons can disagree in what decisions they would make in a given situation, but they can also disagree about what sort of situation they take themselves to be in. One person can deny that a description gets things right when another would see it as perfectly apt. Murdoch writes, "Moral differences can be differences of concept as well as differences of choice...How we see and describe the world is moral too" (p. 73). So linguistic moral philosophers like Hare do not go wrong because they take inspiration from Wittgenstein—they go wrong because they have a narrow idea of which concepts should be thought of as "moral" (and thus also a narrow idea of what use moral concepts are put to). On her view, their single-formula analysis runs counter to the Wittgensteinian insight that "there may be no deep structure" (p. 74).⁴

In "The Idea of Perfection", we see Murdoch again criticizing the application of a Wittgensteinian thought.⁵ On her view, ethicists like Stuart Hampshire focus their analysis of moral language on public things like decision-making and action because they believe that concepts cannot have private referents. This has the unfortunate implication that our moral concepts cannot describe inner life activities like resisting prejudice, recognizing the limits of one's own perspective, and attending to another human being lovingly and justly. Once again, rather than treating this as reason to damn Wittgenstein, Murdoch allows that there is a distance between the remarks made in the investigations and other philosophers' use of them. As she puts it "Wittgenstein remains sphinx-like in the background" and it is only "others" who "have hastened to draw further and more dubious moral and psychological conclusions" (Murdoch, 1962, p. 311).⁶

Consideration of these cases and others has led scholars like Niklas Forsberg and Nora Hämäläinen to think of Murdoch's critical remarks as immanent to linguistic philosophy. To bolster this reading, they notice major continuities between her approach to philosophical questions and Wittgenstein's remarks on philosophical practice. First, she urges her readers to resist the temptation to produce formulae or theories that cover all of the diverse practices we take part in; she did so by returning to the "rough ground" of ordinary experience and an examination of what we would ordinarily (were we not in the grip of deep philosophical assumptions) say about a given subject matter. In the spirit of returning to the "rough ground", she notes that it is "advisable to return frequently to an initial survey of 'the moral'" (Murdoch, 1956, p. 76). As Hämäläinen puts it, Murdoch "anchor[s] philosophical investigations in everyday, heterogenous modes of speaking and thinking" (Hämäläinen, 2014, p. 196). Second, she recommends that we resist the temptation to think that a given word is always linked with the same concept—words remain stable, but the concepts they relate to change over the course of our lives and vary between individuals who use the same word (Murdoch, 1962, p. 322). The idea of courage we have at 20 is different from the idea we have at 40. Forsberg connects this insight to Wittgenstein's remarks on our use of words without fixed meanings (Forsberg, 2022, p. 119).

The first paper that Murdoch gave at the Aristotelian Society—"Thinking and Language" (1951)—has not been analysed as an expression of Murdoch's Wittgensteinian approach to philosophy. It arguably expresses her commitment to this kind of pre-theoretical survey and the eschewing of single-formula analyses of language (in this case, the analysis of mental concepts such as "thinking" in terms of silent or spoken soliloquy and the enjoyment of mental imagery). The paper begins with a characteristic call to:

set aside all philosophical theories, old and new, about the nature of thinking: theories such as that it is having representations, or cognising propositions, or manipulating symbols or behaving in certain ways [in order to] attempt a description of...those kinds of mental activity...which in ordinary English are called 'thinking' (Murdoch, 1951, p. 33).

While this conforms to the current "Wittgensteinian" reading of Murdoch, there is more in this paper to link her to linguistic philosophy. We can appreciate this by turning from Wittgenstein to a second Cambridge linguistic philosopher who was Murdoch's supervisor during her time as a fellow at Newnham College in 1947 and 1948: John Wisdom.

In what follows, I make the case that Wisdom's vision of how one should respond to philosophical perplexities informed Murdoch's early forays into the philosophy of mind. To do so, I will first introduce Wisdom's vision of the role of sceptical and metaphysical paradoxes in philosophy. Second, I will show how his conception of philosophy shapes his critical reception of Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (1949). Finally, I will show that Murdoch's response to the Rylean analysis of mental concepts shares important features in common with Wisdom's treatment of philosophical paradox.⁷ Both Murdoch and Wisdom examine false but persistently tempting philosophical claims about the nature of mind—that it is a hidden stream knowable by one (the Hidden Stream Paradox), that language is a coarse net through which thought inevitably slips (the Coarse Net Paradox)—in order to reveal what can be discovered about us when we take them seriously. These continuities give us a powerful new reason to think of Murdoch as a linguistic philosopher.

2 | JOHN WISDOM ON PERPLEXITY AND CLARITY

John Wisdom studied "moral sciences" under G. E. Moore and C. D. Broad at Cambridge in the mid-1920s. When he returned there to teach in 1934, he attended and was profoundly influenced by Wittgenstein's lectures; they inspired him to change how he approached philosophical questions (Dilman, 1996, p. 577). He took away an abiding interest "in the nature of philosophy, the character of its questions, the kind of investigations these call for, and the forms of reasoning these investigations involve" (p. 578); he learned that a philosophical question can be both verbal and non-verbal. They are verbal in that they are about what we should or should not call something—there is a similarity between the question "should anything be called 'knowledge of another's mind'?" and "should this legal case be characterized as 'negligence'?" in that both are answered by a verbal recommendation and neither recommendation can be defended just by listing the facts of a situation together with a principle about how the concept in question must be applied (Wisdom, 1953, p. 250). But a question that is "verbal" is not therefore "merely verbal". When we come to a resolution in the legal case, it is because we have come to notice a previously overlooked pattern in the facts that helps us to see how they constitute negligence. As we will see, we overcome the temptation to scepticism about the external world or other minds by noticing previously overlooked patterns in our use of concepts and come to acknowledge what is genuinely perplexing in human life.

Wisdom credits Wittgenstein with helping us to see that a philosophical question is verbal and not verbal in a similar sort of way as "Can you play chess without a queen?" (Wisdom, 1952, p. 88). They are like and unlike questions about what is logically possible (like "could one square the circle?") and what is physically possible for animals like us (like "can one last for four days without water?") (Wisdom, 1961, p. 95). It can be tempting to hear the sceptic's claim as a false answer to a question asked in one register (like "what would we ordinarily say about such cases?"), noting that they are using ordinary concepts in ways that violate ordinary usage; we thereby "smother our fears by saying 'It's all nonsense'" (p. 92). We might notice that the sceptic arrives at their conclusion by drawing false analogies between relevantly dissimilar cases, and dissolve their concerns by pointing out that we ordinarily distinguish between such cases. On Wisdom's reading, Wittgenstein thinks this is a mistake. We should allow ourselves to consider cases where a sceptical modal—a claim about what is not possible—would be true and thereby notice the

familiar but overlooked facts that the paradox is true to. By approaching philosophical questions in this way, we can reject the sceptic's verbal recommendation while allowing what they say to call our attention to "facts familiar to us all even though we ignore them" (p. 97).

In his own work, Wisdom attempted to put these Wittgensteinian insights to work in responding to sceptical puzzles.⁸ His writings are shot through with a concern that his contemporaries had stopped taking metaphysical and epistemological questions seriously, being too hasty to show how they violate ordinary language use. Wisdom laments that "too much fun has been made of philosophers who say this kind of thing", and that too often clarificatory philosophers attend to the "letter" and not the "spirit" of what's said. He admits that claims about the unknowability of other minds are false—but his tone is solicitous when he adds "only there is good in them, poor things" (Wisdom, 1936, p. 41). The sort of good that is in them can be appreciated by comparing them to other ways that we are led to see a given subject matter in a new light. A friend can help us to see that the hat we are considering buying is "a monument and too magnificent by half" by presenting us with a far-fetched allusion—saying to us "My dear, the Taj Mahal". Their utterance does not alert us to something that was not in a sense already there before our eyes, or help us to see that the hat in any way looks like the Taj Mahal. And yet their words provoke us to notice something new in what we are looking at (Wisdom, 1953, p. 248). Similarly, sceptical paradoxes are a symptom of penetration into deep truths about human life. "A paradox is a flag which declares a discovery—not a new continent nor a cure for pneumonia but a discovery in the familiar" (Wisdom, 1946, p. 178). This is why it would be a mistake to wish for a world in which philosophical confusions never arose. Wisdom's recommendation is that we allow paradoxical statements to provoke us to notice the puzzling facts that inspire them—facts that answer to the multiple registers that sceptical modals can be heard in.

To show what it means to take philosophical paradoxes as seriously as the hat-shopping companion's remark about the Taj Mahal, Wisdom considers the claim that we cannot know the causes of our perceptual experience. This sceptic insists that we should not say "I know that there is cheese on the table" but rather that "*very probably* there is cheese on the table" (Wisdom, 1936, p. 43). This recommendation is made because the sceptic believes we are overconfident in linking sense-data to material causes when there is reason to qualify our perceptual judgements. Seemingly observing cheese on the table is compatible with a cheese-facsimile or a hallucination. The person who thinks our observational beliefs should always be qualified in this way is making a recommendation about how we should understand "I know" statements (as overconfident when facsimile possibilities have not been ruled out) and how we should restrict our use of them. The unserious philosopher might reject this as nonsense—we ordinarily distinguish between observational knowledge and merely probable belief in a way that would be impossible if we took the conceivability of facsimiles as a reason for qualifying our beliefs. Taking this question seriously, however, we come to recognize that what is at issue is in part a question about the importance of our current practice of using belief-qualifiers. They are a verbal tool we use to temper one another's expectations. We cannot accept the sceptic's recommendation for reasons that are related to our need for a notation to mark out situations where one should proceed with caution, not get one's hopes up, etc. (pp. 43–44). By taking the sceptic seriously, we notice that there's a sense in which imagining a life where beings do without this notation is possible, but what we are imagining is not ourselves (beings who lead our form of life). For Wisdom, it is helpful to compare the senses of "can" here with "can you play chess without a Queen?"⁹

Sceptical paradoxes can lead us to discover something about what is unimaginable for us. But their remarks can also be attended to in a different register, one that illuminates a difference between the sort of dependence at play when I need to rely on a friend's testimony to learn what happened while I was absent (a case that can be contrasted with a case where I was there to witness events for myself) and the dependence at play when we must rely on our senses to observe that there is cheese on the table (a case that cannot be contrasted with an imaginable form of "direct" witness) (p. 46). The sceptic's provocations can also lead us to see differences in what it is possible to doubt; we can understand the possibility of mistake in some cases of observational judgement, but cannot imagine being mistaken about the fact that I am in pain. By allowing ourselves to be led by the sceptic's paradoxical claims, we can discover patterns in our linguistic practices that we might otherwise overlook (pp. 42–46). We can also begin to

understand why views of this sort persist as they do—“not merely because they are symptoms of an intractable disorder but because they are philosophically useful” (p. 50). Philosophers go wrong when they simply diagnose sceptical utterances as confusions or falsehoods without allowing themselves to be provoked to puzzlement and discovery.

3 | WISDOM ON THE CONCEPT OF MIND

Seeing how Wisdom understands the role of philosophical paradox, we can now turn our attention to his reception of Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*. As we shall see, Murdoch's investigation of the Coarse Net Paradox bears a striking similarity to his investigation of the Hidden Stream Paradox. First, both philosophers are largely sympathetic with Ryle's project; but second, both believe that Ryle has been too hasty in his dismissal of philosophical myths. Finally, both explain the power of these myths in terms of the puzzling facts they provoke us to attend to—facts that Ryle does not properly acknowledge because he is too narrowly dedicated to showing that his opponents' verbal recommendations should be rejected, resting as they do on a category mistake.

Ryle attributes the persistence of the problem of other minds to a category mistake. Questions about someone else's mental state can look like questions about the presence or absence of ghostly mental entities or processes. It seems as if I can enjoy direct introspective knowledge of these private items, but others can only make inferences about them on the basis of indirect, bodily evidence such as my spoken self-reports or facial expressions. The appearance that there is an epistemically significant asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of other minds depends on the claim that mental states like sensations, intentions, thoughts, and emotions are distinct from how they are expressed in bodily behaviour. When we believe that it is sensible to say “B has said that they think the ice is thin, warned others that it would be dangerous to skate too close to the centre of the pond, and is removing his own skates—but I have not observed his belief that the ice is thin”, we have made the same sort of logical mistake that one would make if, upon being given a tour of the various buildings of a university campus, they then insisted “but you have not yet shown me *the university*” (as if this were another building in addition to the libraries, classrooms, etc.) (Ryle, 1949, pp. 18–20). B's belief that the ice is dangerously thin is not an object or event in addition to the behaviours we have observed; rather, ascribing such a belief to someone is claiming that there is a disposition that explains and predicts this and an indefinitely heterogeneous set of behaviours. We can learn what someone believes by noticing how they behave in relevant circumstances (p. 129).¹⁰

Throughout *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle uses this insight into the logical behaviour of mental concepts to show that the metaphysical problem of other minds should be thought of as a practical problem. Metaphysical dualism gives the appearance that mental concepts refer to private entities or events that are at best indirectly evidenced by the public movements of the body. This appearance falls away when we notice that “mind” and ‘body’ are not two concepts of the same logical order; what I do when I affirm “B thinks p” is to either explain their patterns of behaviour or make hypotheses about how B would behave under certain circumstances (e.g., he is avowing p because he believes it; or, believing p, B would say p if asked by an intimate friend in a private setting). When we stop distinguishing mind from body, we no longer need to think that I learn about B's thoughts by indirect evidence, whereas B has access to a different, properly mental way of determining what he thinks. As Ryle puts it:

The sorts of things that I can find out about myself are the same as the sorts of things that I can find out about other people, and the methods of finding them out are much the same. A residual difference in the supplies of the requisite data makes some differences in degree between what I can know about myself and what I can know about you (Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, p. 149).

The asymmetry of self-knowledge and knowledge of other minds is a function of the practical fact that I have more opportunities to notice what I'm disposed to say or do than anyone else does.¹¹ There is no one that I spend every

waking moment around and who can bear witness to all of my behavioural dispositions in action. Furthermore, I often censor what I do and say for familiar reasons such as professionalism and consideration of others' feelings (p. 173). This is compatible with thinking that you and I can both find out what I think about something by noticing what I say in response to a question. A thought is not a private accompaniment to what is said aloud, accessible only to the thinker. As Ryle puts it, "No metaphysical Iron Curtain exists compelling us to be for ever absolute strangers to one another, though ordinary circumstances, together with some deliberate management, serve to maintain a reasonable aloofness" (ibid.).

Wisdom praises *The Concept of Mind* for illuminating the ways that mental states can be manifest in behaviour. Ryle treats the success of novelists like Jane Austen in conveying the "motives, thoughts, perturbations and habits" of their characters through descriptions of their "doings, sayings, and imaginings, their grimaces, gestures, and tones of voice" as a testament to the strength of his thesis (p. 309). Wisdom agrees, noting that this accounts for why novelists avoid conveying their characters' mental states by bluntly telling their readers about them (e.g., "He was sad"), preferring to describe their behaviour in ways that manifest those states (e.g., "he turned away, his eyes filled with tears"). Ryle helps us to see that "many statements which philosophers would call descriptions of bodily performance are not merely that, and there are no statements about sensations to which nothing about bodily symptoms is relevant" (Wisdom, 1950, p. 192). That is to say, all mental states bear at least some relation to observable behaviour.

Wisdom criticizes Ryle for neglecting the role that experience plays in self-knowledge. Wisdom worries that in presenting the problem of other minds as practical rather than metaphysical, Ryle loses sight of what is truly puzzling. It is not that other minds cannot be known (which is false). It is that *the soul is visible only to one* (p. 195). In his eagerness to show that the first of these sceptical modals is false, Ryle fails to consider what sceptical paradoxes can provoke us to discover about the logic of sensation, namely, "the facts which lead people to say that a person has a way of knowing how he feels which no one else has [and] has a right to say what he does about how he feels which no one else has ever had or ever will have" (p. 196). In short, the facts that motivate scepticism are facts about the unique authority of some expressions of self-knowledge.

Rather than focusing on cases where I use my own behaviour to make judgements about what I think, what my motives are, or what sort of mood I'm in—cases that show that there is no necessary asymmetry between self-knowledge and other-knowledge—Wisdom invites us to consider cases that show that there is nonetheless an asymmetry of some kind. These cases reveal that you cannot discover what I am feeling by having feelings of your own. Being in pain, I know that I am in pain. There is no case that we can imagine wherein you find out about my sensation by undergoing my sensation (ibid.). Clearly, witnessing my grimaces would not fit that description. Try as we might, we cannot imagine you having a sensation that we would call "the same as" mine and that would entitle you to make claims about my experience *in the same way* as my feelings of pain do. We might consider a case where, every time I painfully stub my toe, you also feel a pain in your toe (by some species of telepathy, suppose). We might even suppose that you can draw reliable conclusions about my sensations by relying on this co-sensation (p. 198). Would this be a case of learning about my sensation in the same way that I do? Wisdom invites us to ask whether we would call your co-sensation, caused as it is by mine, "the same" as mine.¹²

That we are inclined to say "no" helps us to see something about the logic of sensations, namely, that they are had by one; the having of a sensation gives that one person a reason to describe themselves as undergoing the sensation. I can sometimes determine what I'm about by reflecting on how I have behaved, what I have said in my uncensored moments, or by noticing my accomplishments. At other times, however, I must reflect on the feelings that pass through my consciousness to determine the character of my mental state. "How do I know I am wishing for this, fearing that, thinking of so and so, since all I know is that my heart is fluttering or feels as if it is, that I have a sinking feeling, that I hear as it were a voice? How can I from these presentations that float on the stream of mental activity know the condition of the currents in it?" (p. 192) The ability to link symptoms and behavioural manifestations to mental states can allow us to learn about others' mental states—this is all that we can appeal to. The first-person case differs importantly in that the events of their inner life—their flavour, intensity, duration and ordering—are sometimes part of what I appeal to when making these sorts of judgements about myself.

According to Wisdom, this is the insight flagged by the paradox that no one ever knows anything about the mind of another, that the mind is a hidden stream knowable by one. The Hidden Stream Paradox only becomes misleading rather than illuminating if we follow it to the conclusion that only I can know my mental states (or that because you rely on my grimaces, your beliefs about my pain are indirect, inferential, and fall short of knowledge) (p. 202). Wisdom rejects the sceptic's verbal recommendation that we restrict our use of "knowledge" to self-knowledge. The question of whether or not we know others' minds is, he writes "a question of fact and not of philosophy. But the fact is we do" (p. 204). When we grant that others' thoughts and feelings can be known, we do not need to deny the facts about asymmetry that the sceptic draws our attention to through paradox.

The sceptical modal that we cannot know the others' mind can also be heard in the register of practical or human possibility rather than logical necessity—as less akin to "could one square a circle?" and closer to "Can a human being last for 4 days without water?" (Wisdom, 1961, p. 95). The paradox then invites us to notice facts about ourselves and our circumstances that make us strangers to one another. For example, when Matthew Arnold declares "We mortal millions live alone" he is "concerned with facts familiar to us all even though we ignore them...He was concerned with something more difficult to remedy than what we usually count as being alone, with something more difficult to reach than we usually count as meeting other people at a large luncheon party or a family breakfast" (pp. 96–7). The kind of relationship that our way of life makes most readily available fall short of the sort of intimacy that Arnold paradoxically contrasts with being in a crowd rather than being alone; but the impossibility of intimacy at a large luncheon is not like the impossibility of squaring a circle. Sceptical paradoxes about the possibility of knowing another's mind can help us to recognize facts about the logic of our language or about the kinds of possibilities available to beings such as ourselves in the world we live in.

This is by no means exhaustive—in his comments on *The Concept of Mind*, Wisdom only means to demonstrate how statements that are literally false can nonetheless provoke us to recognize deep truths in the familiar. He does not intend to reinstate other minds scepticism. Rather, he hopes to draw our attention to a philosophical task that, on his view, Ryle failed to take up: that of acknowledging the truth in the spirit, if not the letter, of expressions of the problem of other minds. On Wisdom's view, Ryle is so intent on purging the various myths and legends that arise on the basis of the mind–body category mistake that he fails to see the positive role that can be played by a literal falsehood. A paradox can flag and provoke a discovery in the familiar. The practice of tracing paradoxes to the various experiences that give them sense in the way that Wisdom recommends is a way of practicing linguistic philosophy that Murdoch carried forward in her own response to Ryle.

4 | MURDOCH AND THE TRUTH IN PARADOX

Like Wisdom, it would be a mistake to describe Murdoch as purely antagonistic to the Rylean project. She acknowledges the strengths of his analysis of mental concepts in both of her early Aristotelian Society presentations—"Thinking and Language" (1951) and "Nostalgia for the Particular" (1952)—highlighting familiar experiences that recommend it. It is true, she claims, that we identify our own emotions by looking to their outward context and not by dwelling on the quality of our feelings (Murdoch, 1952, p. 45).¹³ She acknowledges that sometimes thinking is like rehearsing an inner monologue or speaking to oneself (such that we do not necessarily need to distinguish expressing our thoughts aloud with what happens when thought is kept private). When we have worked out what we think, putting it into words, our thoughts become "readily exposable" (Murdoch, 1951, p. 34). Finally, she affirms that sometimes others can rightly make judgements about our intentions on the basis of the behaviour they have witnessed and what they know of our personal history (p. 36). In sum, she concedes to Ryle that "What we look at when using mental words is context and conduct, not inner events. *This is true up to a point*" (ibid.). The success of this model in helping us to make sense of familiar experiences of knowing others' minds can tempt one to think that its scope is universal, covering the full range of what we do when we think. Murdoch thinks this should be resisted.

We see the influence of Wisdom on Murdoch when we notice a major feature of her response to Ryle: her invocation of “neurotic or metaphysical views about language.” These include the view that “consciousness is the gaps in language”; the picture of language as a “coarse net through which experiences slip” (pp. 35–6); and the image of thought as a “mental datum” that we use language to refer to. In what follows, I will be primarily focusing on what I have been calling the Coarse Net Paradox; this is the view that, far from seamlessly expressing thought, one might think that language inevitably falls short because it is general while thoughts are unique individuals. That Murdoch thinks of this as paradoxical is evidenced by her admission that sometimes we do make our thoughts exposable when we develop a vague reflection into a “fully verbalized thought”. For the meaning of such a thought to be appreciated, the other might need to heed our tone, observe the gestures that accompany our utterance, and appreciate the context in which it has been uttered; they do not, however, need to access some non-verbal, mental item that we think of as the true referent of the word “thought” (p. 34). This accords with Ryle’s contention that thought can both be either private or public. While it is true that we can develop sophisticated tricks for withholding or disguising what we think, this does not mean that others cannot learn what we think from what we say when we speak frankly and spontaneously. He writes, “In a certain sense of ‘natural’, the natural thing to do is to speak one’s mind” (Ryle, 1949, p. 173).¹⁴ Murdoch does not believe it is literally true that language is incapable of expressing thought publicly—that we are incapable of speaking our minds—and would reject a verbal recommendation to call every utterance (no matter how well-articulated) inadequate to every thought (no matter how simple). Why should we deny that sometimes we think aloud in language and that what we say is what we think?

Murdoch is not, however, content to hastily dismiss the Coarse Net Paradox. In a Wisdomian spirit, she investigates how it might flag an insight into the familiar by considering it in a variety of registers. The “cannot” in “thought cannot be linguistically expressed” can be understood in connection to: (i) the logical relationship between thought and language; (ii) practical circumstances that can prevent us from successfully expressing our thought; and (iii) psychological impediments to self-reflection.

4.1 | Logical: The scope of thought and language

By saying that thought cannot be linguistically expressed, we might be responding to the logical difference between thought and language. As Murdoch puts it, “language and thought are not co-extensive” (Murdoch, 1951, p. 35). Sometimes thought is speaking or silent enjoyment of fully formulated verbal contents. However, thought is more diverse than this. When we think about other activities we call “thinking”, we notice that there is often a difference between what we would tell someone when asked what we were thinking just then and the words that had just been occurring to us just then (if indeed there were any). Sometimes we enjoy reveries in thought, which may or may not involve sentences or even words. Telling someone the words that occurred to me while I was ruminating about my past—say, “Rosebud”—would not go very far towards sharing my thoughts with that person (unless they already knew “Rosebud” was the name of my childhood sled). The verbal summary of this episode of thinking would be something crafted for the listener, not a chronicling of words that I had just thought.

Sometimes we think about an interesting experience we have had in an effort to put it into words. Murdoch uses reading poetry as an example of this. To characterize her experience of reading a stanza of the John Clare poem “Summer Images”, Murdoch describes “a smooth delicate suspense followed by an enormous sense of chaotic expansion at the last line” (p. 37). The words of the poem form part of what she reflected on to arrive at this characterization, but only insofar as these produced the sense of texture, rhythm, and dynamism she is trying to characterize. This is another occasion when “a thought experience overflows its verbal content” (p. 37). By taking the Coarse Net Paradox seriously, we can be provoked to notice that thought is more than just speech that might be kept silent or shared audibly with others. Thought is sometimes the attempt to put non-verbal or partially linguistic episodes of thinking like rumination and contemplation into words.

If the Coarse Net Paradox is taken as a verbal recommendation to call every verbal expression of or summary of a thought “inadequate”, it should be rejected. But like Wisdom’s Hidden Stream Paradox, it can be heard in a plurality of registers. In its logical register, the paradox is an invitation to notice that thought is not always verbal, and that we do not communicate what we are thinking about or towards by reporting on the words that occurred during those episodes.

4.2 | Practical: Eloquence and self-expression

Like Wisdom, Murdoch also hears the “cannot” of the sceptical modal she considers in practical terms. Like Matthew Arnold using paradox to illuminate the circumstances that make intimacy an impossibility, Murdoch considers the circumstances that can make our thoughts impossible to express. The relevant circumstances are those that affect our ability to successfully characterize inner life phenomena. One condition is the “availability of names” (p. 34). For Murdoch, “availability” relates to the conventions of the society we inhabit. There are well-worn phrases that we turn to out of habit—just think of how readily we describe ourselves as being in a mental fog. There is an experience that we are reflecting on and attempting to characterize, and this cliché goes some way to achieving that. But there might be particularities in our experience that are glossed over or “stifled by a conventional description” (p. 35). We can imagine this “mental fog” being an experience in which we have spent a sleepless night ruminating over troubling news, and the next day find our thought is slow, cumbersome, and regularly interrupted by intrusive images and phrases relating to the news. There is a “foggy” lack of clarity, but this phrase is too coarse—the nuances of our experience slip through it.

The “cannot” in this familiar situation is practical, not logical. This is revealed by the fact that we can articulate ourselves successfully if our circumstances change. Murdoch notes this sometimes happens when we coin or discover new language for new experiences (p. 36). We are capable of developing novel metaphors or analogies for expressing inner experience—this is the sort of practice Murdoch highlights in discussing “Summer Images.” Similarly, when others who are more articulate than us originate imaginative phrases, we can make these our own. Murdoch thinks this is an important way that poets foster eloquence in others (*ibid.*)

Moreover, our characterizations of experience are answerable to standards of truth—although not those proper to “scientifically minded verificatory enquiry” (p. 41). Others cannot gather around my experience and confirm that it was one of “smooth delicate suspense” in the same way that they could gather around a rock and each verify that a hand can be swept across its surface without meeting a nook or jag. Only I can reflect and determine the aptness of that metaphor.¹⁵ The criteria we appeal to when considering whether or not we have hit the mark in recalling a past state of mind, formulating a vague idea, characterizing an inner experience or remembering a past incident are: “adequacy, richness, flexibility, which will depend on the subject’s inducing a truthful and imaginative state of mind in the present” (*ibid.*). Murdoch thinks these criteria are perfectly familiar to us—in listing them, she is not reporting a discovery like a cure for pneumonia. Rather, she is showing what we notice about our own ordinary practices when we take the Coarse Net Paradox seriously. We notice that arriving at *le mot juste* depends on eloquence, attention to detail, and a willingness to adjust in light of those details. We notice that we can be hampered if the concepts and phrases we have learned throughout our lives are too coarse and we lack the imagination to develop richer ones. And we come to appreciate that overcoming this barrier can be something we do by thinking with others, especially poets.

4.3 | Personal: Repression and self-expression

Murdoch notes that part of what distinguishes an adequate, rich, and flexible mental description from one that is inadequate, coarse, and rigid is our state of mind. If we induce an imaginative and truthful state of mind, then we will be attentive to our object, we will be diligent in hunting down the right words and resisting coarsely conventional expressions, and we will modify our formulation when we have reason to. Murdoch implies that truthfulness and

imagination are not our default mode (such that they must at least sometimes be “induced”). There are sometimes psychological barriers to self-understanding that give a third sense to the claim that language cannot express thought.

Murdoch's reflections here are brief, but they parallel two more substantive discussions of this phenomenon. Looking backwards, they echo R. G. Collingwood's writings on corrupted consciousness in *The Principles of Art* (1938).¹⁶ Looking forward, they presage her later writings on attention. Collingwood describes the dynamics by which consciousness attends to sensation and makes what we experience available to the intellect. This procedure can be derailed when something we come close to recognizing is alarming to us, leading us to shrink from it and turn our attention to something less intimidating (Collingwood, 1938, p. 217). Following Freudian theory, he refers to this process as “repression”; the consequence of repression is the construction of a purified and distorted idea of what we have experienced, called “fantasy” (p. 219). Collingwood describes repression and fantasy as forms of evil that lie somewhere between disease (evil suffered) and wrongdoing (evil done) (p. 220).

In her later writings, Murdoch would develop the view that beyond decision-making and action, the quality of our consciousness matters morally. Our capacity to develop a realistic view of the world can be compromised by two forces: “convention” and “neurosis” (the propensity for “fantasy”) (Murdoch, 1959, p. 270). Like Collingwood, Murdoch links her discussions of fantasy to Freudian theory, describing our psyches as dominated by egocentrism.¹⁷ Conventionality and neurosis are the kinds of forces that lead one to adopt a settled view of another person that reflects the social norms of one's own historically specific upbringing (e.g., by holding a young person to an outdated standard of dignified comportment) and can evidence what one is afraid to acknowledge (e.g., that one's son has chosen to centre his life on a wife rather than his doting mother, and is warranted in doing so). Such a person might allow their consciousness to be determined by convention and neurosis, indulging in unfair mental caricatures of the wife and repressing evidence of her positive qualities. Alternatively, they might acknowledge the possibility that they have been prejudiced and jealous, reflecting on this person with a renewed attention. Murdoch thinks that moral philosophers go wrong when they neglect the moral significance of this kind of conscious activity (Murdoch, 1962, pp. 312–5). Repression would thus become a major element of Murdoch's moral psychology by the time she wrote *The Sovereignty of Good* in the 1960s.

In “Thinking and Language”, Murdoch alludes to two examples that suggest that she sees repression and fantasy as barriers to self-understanding. First, she suggests that ideas can be alarming to us by describing an example drawn from Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parma*. In that work, the character Mosca fears the mention of the word “love” between Fabrice and the Duchess (Murdoch, 1951, p. 35). He is afraid that they are in love, is perhaps aware that it is a strong possibility, but does not want his fear to be confirmed. We can imagine many reasons for wanting to avoid noticing others' love. If I were in love with the Duchess and friends with Fabrice, I might be afraid that my friendship would be compromised by jealousy; I might be afraid to discover that my romantic charms are less potent than I had believed; or I might not be ready to face a future in which my romantic hopes will never be realized. In such cases, one might fail to induce a truthful state of mind, allowing themselves to live in a fantasy where none of these possibilities need to be faced.

A second case that Murdoch mentions is drawn from George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. She writes, “When Gwendolen hesitates to throw the lifebelt to her detested husband, who subsequently drowns, it matters very much to her to know whether or not at that moment she intended his death” (p. 36). We could imagine it mattering in two ways. First, Gwendolen could honestly want to know whether or not she intentionally let her husband die, and induce a truthful and imaginative state of mind to find out. Alternatively, we could imagine Gwendolen concerned not to discover she intended his death. Rather than allowing herself to notice and properly take stock of what transpired in her while her husband was floundering, she might turn her attention elsewhere. We could imagine her insisting that she fits the conventional description of women as prone to panic and hysteria, insisting that this must have been what happened when she failed to do what was needed to save him. In such a case, the gap between Gwendolen's verbal summary of what happened and her experience would be the result of a failure to induce the right state of mind in reflection.

There is a sense in which Ryle also acknowledges psychological barriers to self-knowledge. Throughout *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle repeatedly notes that the individual is sometimes the worst judge of their own mental states—there are powerful biases that can make it hard for us to recognize our own motives, intentions, and character for what they are (particularly when what we would discover would be unflattering) (Ryle, 1949, p. 88). However, Ryle's recognition of this is not connected to the Coarse Net Paradox, and how he characterizes the difficulty of self-knowledge differs from Murdoch. For Ryle, the activity whereby we investigate our own mental states is the same in kind as how someone else finds out about these things—namely, by attending to how we are disposed to speak and behave in a range of contexts. In the case of wondering what we think, the question is answered by noticing what we are disposed to say when we speak in an unstudied way. While Murdoch acknowledges that what we say aloud or the monologues we privately enjoy can be relevant to answering questions about what we were just thinking, they are not all that we need to attend to when we are trying to characterize inner experience. Our propensity for fantasy can lead us to ignore our own past patterns of speech and behaviour, but it can also lead us to repress awareness of the qualitative dimensions of inner experience. Without taking the Coarse Net Paradox seriously, we might lose sight of an important way that we participate in keeping the net of language coarse to repress difficult truths about ourselves.

5 | CONCLUSION

In summarizing what distinguishes Wisdom's approach to linguistic philosophy, Dilman writes:

Wisdom works by pitting the different voices raised by this question about 'our knowledge of other minds' against each other while allowing them to 'speak their fill'. Between them, he believes, if one can sift out the truth each contains from the distortion, if one can get to what each distorts, they contain the different pieces one needs to put together to resolve the puzzlement which the question expresses (Dilman, 1996, p. 579).

As we have seen, these voices are linked to the different registers in which the sceptical modal "we cannot know the mind of another" can be understood and to the very real experiences one might utter such a statement in response to. Taking the linguistic method seriously, we might say, involves recognizing that sceptical paradoxes should not be heard only as statements of epistemic impossibility and outlandish recommendations about how we should restrict the use of "knowledge".

While Wisdom agrees with Ryle that we do have knowledge of other minds and attain it by observing the other's behaviour, he criticizes Ryle for only attending to the letter, not the spirit, of the sceptic's utterances. By investigating the different voices that questions about our knowledge of other minds can be asked in, Wisdom shows what they can provoke us to recognize in our ordinary experience. This includes the deep puzzlement that comes with noticing the peculiar logic of sensation, which is a route to self-knowledge that is only available to one person. It also includes recognizing the ways that human intimacy can be restricted by a life in which we see most of our acquaintances at crowded luncheons and, paradoxically, remain strangers.

This form of investigation may not be unique to Wisdom—he (modestly) acknowledges Wittgenstein's formative influence on his approach to philosophy. Wisdom's claim that a paradox is a flag signalling a discovery in the familiar suggests that a philosopher's role is sometimes to draw out the insights that give truth to a paradox rather than rushing to dispel it. The importance of this task is brought out when we reflect on Wittgenstein's remarks on the concealing power of familiarity:

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one's eyes.) The real

foundations of their inquiry do not strike people at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck them.—And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful. (Wittgenstein, 2009, §129)

Wisdom's reflections on *The Concept of Mind* ensure that what is striking and powerful in the familiar experiences that lead one to think of the mind as a hidden stream have their say.

Wisdom's status as Murdoch's Cambridge supervisor enables us to make a new linkage between Murdoch and the linguistic tradition. Murdoch celebrates the Wittgensteinian insight that our linguistic practices might not be underpinned by a single deep structure, that we should be alive to the diversity of what we do with our words, and that we sometimes must return to the rough ground of ordinary experience to dislodge deeply entrenched pictures of human life and practice. I have shown that she also shared in the Wisdomian belief that philosophical paradoxes have the power to illuminate aspects of human life that otherwise might go overlooked. In her hands, the paradox that language is a coarse net through which thought inevitably slips does something more than make the recommendation that we should avoid calling any verbal summary of thought “adequate.” This is false and can prevent us from noticing what we achieve when we are truthful, imaginative, and attentive to inner life experiences. However, a paradox does more than just distort. The Coarse Net Paradox also reveals the diverse ways that we express our thoughts and how little this can look like reciting a formerly silent monologue; it shows that inarticulacy must be overcome if a characterization of thought is to be made adequate to its object, and it shows the considerable moral challenge of achieving this.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Niklas Forsberg, who argues that Murdoch may be described as an “ordinary language philosopher” (“given, of course, that one understands ‘ordinary language philosophy’ in the right way”), notes that this position has been met with strong resistance from Murdoch scholars (Forsberg, 2022, p. 115).
- ² A third complication that is worth mentioning but beyond the scope of this paper arises when considering her writings from the late 1960s, where she begins to link her views on the moral life and the development of one's moral vision to images drawn from Plato's writings. While this presents a seeming tension with the Wittgensteinian opposition to substantive metaphysical theorizing, David Robjant and Nora Hämäläinen have denied that there is a real conflict here and argue that we can and should take her at her word when she calls herself “Wittgensteinian Neo-Platonist” (which she did in a 1978 interview) (Hämäläinen, 2014; Robjant, 2012).
- ³ Murdoch says as much in “Metaphysics and Ethics”. Her remarks here form the basis of Niklas Forsberg's discussion of her relationship to linguistic philosophy in “Taking the Linguistic Method Seriously: On Iris Murdoch on Language and Linguistic Philosophy” (Forsberg, 2018).
- ⁴ Murdoch elaborates, “Wittgenstein says that ‘What has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—forms of life.’ For purposes of analysis moral philosophy should remain at the level of the differences, taking the moral forms of life as given, and not try to get behind them to a single form” (Murdoch, 1957, p. 97).
- ⁵ We should not conclude from this that Murdoch is never critical of Wittgenstein himself; she holds him accountable for opening the door for philosophy's purging of the inner life and contributing to the “thinning” of the philosophical understanding of the self (though the fairness of these charges is questionable). For further discussion, see Forsberg (2013) and Christensen (2022).
- ⁶ Consider also her remark that “Wittgenstein as I have said does not apply this idea to moral concepts, nor discuss its relation to mental concepts in so far as these form part of the sphere of morality” (Murdoch, 1962, p. 318).
- ⁷ I characterize “Thinking and Language” as a response to Ryle despite the fact that he is not directly named in the text because it was a paper given at a 1951 Symposium of the Aristotelian Society where Ryle was in conversation with Murdoch; what she says bears directly on the analysis of “thinking” found in *The Concept of Mind* (which was published only a couple of years prior in 1949).

- ⁸ Wisdom is modest about how well he succeeds in living up to Wittgenstein's example. He prefaces an early paper by writing "Wittgenstein has not read this over-compressed paper and I warn people against supposing it a closer imitation of Wittgenstein than it is. On the other hand, I can hardly exaggerate the debt I owe to him and how much of the good in this work is his—not only in the treatment of this philosophical difficulty and that but in the matter of how to do philosophy" (Wisdom, 1936, p. 36 n. 1).
- ⁹ Wisdom elsewhere remarks "Every philosophical question is really a request for a description of a class of animals—of a very familiar class of animals" (Wisdom, 1944, p. 112). The question of whether or not we can go on without expectation-tempering notation is a question about what is possible for human animals and points towards the sorts of descriptions that Wittgenstein speaks of as our "natural history" (Wittgenstein, 2009, §25).
- ¹⁰ By emphasizing the indefinite heterogeneity of the exercises of dispositions of this kind, Ryle is contrasting belief and other mental concepts with concepts like "solubility" that name "single-track dispositions." When we describe something as "soluble," we license our audience to predict that it will behave in one way (dissolving) under one circumstance (being submerged in water), and to explain the event of its having dissolved in terms of its solubility (Ryle, 1949, p. 43). By contrast, when we ascribe a belief to someone, this gives our audience license to expect a wider range of behaviours and reactions in a wider variety of circumstances (e.g., in ascribing a belief that the ice is dangerously thin to someone, we give our audience license to expect that: when they skate, they will avoid the centre of the pond; when they imagine someone skating at the centre of the pond, they shudder with trepidation; etc.) (p. 129).
- ¹¹ Ryle denies that I'm always better situated to make judgments about my own mental states than others. When we are wondering about our motives, intentions, character, or abilities, we have a large repository of data that we can appeal to in making our judgments. I can recall past deeds, thoughts, fancies, and feelings that others do not know about. I am, however, interested in avoiding unflattering conclusions, so I'm less likely to make full use of this advantage. According to Ryle, one's "appreciations of his own inclinations are unlikely to be unbiased and he is not in a favourable position to compare his own actions and reactions with those of others. In general, we think that an impartial and discerning spectator is a better judge of a person's prevailing motives, as well as of his habits, abilities, and weaknesses, than is the person himself" (Ryle, 1949, p. 88). Far from having infallible introspective access to our minds, self-knowledge can require that we overcome powerful biases.
- ¹² Wisdom describes this kind of questioning as a Wittgensteinian technique of investigating various candidates for "knowing the mind of another" and asking whether or not we would call them that. "For example, one may ask 'Suppose a nerve of your body was joined to a nerve of Smith's, so that when someone stuck a pin into Smith you felt pain; would that be knowing, or having, Smith's pain?'" (Wisdom, 1952, p. 89).
- ¹³ Ryle claims that to identify a given bodily feeling as, for example, a twinge of fear rather than a twinge of remorse requires that we understand it as a symptom of a state of agitation in which I am subject to opposing forces, say my desire to be safe and circumstances in which that safety seems compromised (Ryle, 1949, pp. 90–1). The feelings considered independently do not instruct us what to call them—we need to attend to the context in which the feeling arise with some understanding of our own motives (which we also discover by noticing our dispositions).
- ¹⁴ Furthermore, the activity of thinking can be performed in one's head and privately, but we can just as well think aloud or on paper (e.g., when we do sums in a notebook rather than "in our head"). Ryle writes, "Now calculating does not first acquire the rank of proper thinking when its author begins to do it with his lips closed and his hands in his pockets. The sealing of the lips is no part of the definition of thinking. A man may think aloud or half under his breath" (Ryle, 1949, p. 35).
- ¹⁵ We might at best imagine someone who has also read the poem wondering how I could possibly have experience of it that would warrant the use of the metaphor I use—if my characterization is outlandish enough, my interlocutor might wonder if I'm bringing too much of my own personal history to my reading or even misunderstanding the concepts I'm using. In other cases, Murdoch notes, my words might change how my interlocutor experiences the poem when they return to it (Murdoch, 1951, p. 37).
- ¹⁶ While Murdoch does not cite Collingwood in her published writings, her 1947 journal records her engaging with *The Principles of Art* (particularly, his view that "Art lives in the imagination—not on canvas") (Murdoch, 1947, p. 194).
- ¹⁷ In "On 'God' and 'Good'", Murdoch writes that Freud's picture of the human psyche is "realistic and detailed." She describes it as the view that the psyche is "an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control...fantasy is a stronger force than reason" (Murdoch, 1969, p. 341).

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