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Moral Attention and Bad Sentimentality

Lesley Jamieson[1]

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Abstract
In this paper, I challenge standard views of the moral badness of sentimentality defended by art critics and philosophers. Accounts based on untruthfulness and self-indulgence lack the resources to both explain the badness of bad sentimentality and to allow that there are benign instances. We are sometimes permitted to be sentimental even though it is self-serving. A non-moralistic account should allow for this. To provide such an account, I first outline a substantive view of the ideal of *unsentimentality* by turning to Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters on Cézanne*. Rilke celebrates the artist for his unsentimental love of his subjects and "untiring objective wakefulness" to them. I then turn to Iris Murdoch's ethics of attention (itself influenced by Rilke) to explain why this ideal is so difficult to live up to in practice, the various ways that we fall short, and what our failures mean. What Murdoch contributes is both a sense that the lovingly attentive attitude that Rilke describes is morally—and not just artistically—important and a compassionate account of the human egocentrism that inhibits it. By thinking of sentimentality as a failure of moral attention, we can appreciate how particular instances differ from one another. Sentimentality can console us in difficult times or can gratify our egos; it can be a form of escapism or can rigidly enclose reality; and it can be harmlessly self-serving or a selfish failure to morally attend to the other when it counts. I conclude by outlining some ways that being seen with Cézanne-like moral attention can matter to us.

Keywords Iris Murdoch · Rilke · Ethics of attention · Sentimentality · Fantasy · Philosophy of love · Paternalism · Selfishness

✉ Lesley Jamieson
lesleypaige.jamieson@upce.cz

[1] Faculty of Arts and Philosophy - Centre for Ethics as Study in Human Value, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Pardubice, Stavařov 97, Pardubice 532 10, Czech Republic

1 Introduction

'Sentimental' may never be a compliment, but sentimentality is at least sometimes benign. For someone about whom another person is being sentimental, there can be some temptation to feel aggrieved at being seen in a sentimental light. This is sometimes warranted. Consider the following case. A child wants to take public transit to the library on her own for the first time. Her father has accompanied her on this trip many times in the past, she's demonstrated a knowledge of the landmarks along the route, the name of the destination bus stop, and the route number. And yet he still thinks of her as a babe in the woods, sure to get into trouble. He insists that she wait until he's available to accompany her. The father's overprotectiveness leaves his daughter feeling frustrated and hurt that he doesn't believe in her.

In other cases, however, sentimentality looks benign. Imagine a woman on the eve of her marriage having a conversation with her dad. He keeps referring to her as his little girl, promising to keep an eye on her soon-to-be-husband, and threatening violence if he doesn't take proper care of her. This may inspire a slight eyeroll, but it doesn't sour the moment. Their relationship has historically included both moments of overprotective posturing like this and moments when her dad proudly acknowledges her independence. The former do not shake her confidence that her dad loves for who she is (not the little girl she used to be).

Both of these cases involve parents attached to a sentimental view of their children and struggling to accept changes in their role as parents. I am, however, inclined to see the second as morally different from the first. If this is true, then this poses a problem for existing accounts of the moral badness of sentimentality. In discussions of the badness of sentimental art and philosophical analyses of sentimentality as a moral vice, two standard criticisms emerge. The badness of sentimentality in art and ordinary human life is a function of untruthfulness, self-indulgence, or both. While these are important aspects of what makes sentimentality morally bad when it is, a richer account is needed if we are to avoid painting benign and bad cases with the same brush.

2 The Badness of Sentimentality

Art critics and philosophers of art have been some of the most vocal critics of sentimentality in the past century. In their writings, 'sentimental' doubles as the name for a kind of bad, kitschy art and a pejorative for the artist who makes it. As Deborah Knight notes, it is not the name for a genre or style of art (Knight 1999: 414–415). What unites the silly novels by lady novelists that George Eliot (1856) decries in her essay of that name, Adolph Bouguereau's paintings of little girls at play, and Alan Jackson's daddy-daughter country ballad "You'll Always Be My Baby" cannot be stated in those terms. Sentimentality is better thought of as a mode of emotional representation. While we sometimes speak of works of art as themselves sentimental, this is parasitic upon the judgment that they've been made by an artist who is being

sentimental towards a subject matter.[1] Furthermore, sentimentality is not a particular emotion. The literary critic I. A. Richards claims that it is best thought of as "a persisting, organized system of dispositions" that are centered around, but are not always directed towards, a primary object that one is sentimental *about* (Richards 1930: 260).

With this in view I propose the following general account of sentimentality. To be sentimental is to be sentimental about something, where this informs both how one is disposed to represent that primary object (i.e., in a one-dimensionally idealizing way) and what one feels towards it (i.e., tender or bittersweet emotions like affection, pity, nostalgia, or solicitude). Typically, sentimentalized objects are represented without qualification as homey, safe, vulnerable, needy, virtuous, sweet, or beautiful. For example, someone who has recently moved to the city might be sentimental about their hometown, wistfully dwelling on how peaceful and friendly it is (despite, say, the rampant homophobia that makes it inhospitable to queer residents). When one is sentimental about something, this also informs how one feels about and represents others (including oneself). For example, the hometown idealizer might be disposed to regard new residents as bringers of unwelcome change and himself as a keeper of tradition.

The critical view of sentimentality in art is relatively modern. Rebecca Bedell notes that times have changed since the late eighteenth century when John Turnbull's paintings of heroic battle scenes from the American War of Independence were celebrated for the unqualified patriotic sentiments they aroused. Art historians and critics have since the late nineteenth century "cast [sentimental art] as shallow, popular, emotionally manipulative, feminine, and commercial" (Bedell 2011: 9).[2] From this list, we see that its badness is thought of as both aesthetic and moral.

It is aesthetically bad, not in the sense that kitschy art cannot be produced with technical virtuosity. Rather, sentimental art's fault is purported to lie in its lack of sophistication, its superficiality, and its appeal to what is lowest in its audience ("mawkish emotion"). As Robert Solomon notes, if high art is challenging, provocative, and formally innovative, then sentimental kitsch is thought of as commercial, cheap, and conservative. Even when it is unique, expensive, and skillfully

[1] Mark Jefferson defends this view. It helps us to understand how non-representational art like music can be sentimental. We might defend the view that music can be sentimental by denying that sentimentality must take an intentional object. This would require that we explain the artwork's sentimentality by appealing to a non-representational aspect of emotion like sensational quality and positing that some feelings are themselves sentimental. There is, however, reason to resist the view that the feelings embodied by music can admit of specifications of this kind absent a situated feeling subject. For this reason, Jefferson argues that we should take the application of 'sentimental' to persons to be the primary usage and treat its application to works of art as parasitic (Jefferson 1983: 522).

There may be other reasons for claiming that we can judge that a work of art is sentimental without implying anything about its creator or performer—for example, one might claim that *Lolita* is a work that is sentimental about Dolores Haze. In this case, however, the judgment is most plausibly about a subject—the work's narrator, Humbert Humbert—and not the novel as such. I'm grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this possible counterexample to my notice.

[2] I. A. Richards notes that this change extended beyond art to ordinary life in the early twentieth century; modern people, he writes, "are afraid of free expansive emotion, even when the situation warrants it… [and] suspect and avoid situations that may awaken strong and simple feelings" (Richards 1930: 269).

produced—Bouguereau's paintings are one-of-a-kind and go for more than a million USD at Sotheby's—its virtues are overridden by how undemanding it is (Solomon 1991: 1–4). The audience can enjoy the emotional kick it offers without noticing anything beyond what is straightforwardly depicted—pretty children, pastoral scenery, heroic generals—and allowing their emotions and reveries to take flight from there. According to the critics, it's bad qua art.

Besides these aesthetic crimes, sentimental artists are also charged with two clusters of moral failing. The first pertains to their failure to respect their audience and includes: manipulation, corrupting hearts and minds, and deception.[3] The second cluster—more germane to this discussion since they are shared between artists and those of us whose sentimentality is a private affair—pertains to how such artists relate to their subject matter and includes misrepresentation and self-indulgence. Anthony Saville, a critic of sentimentality in art, glosses it as the "false-coloring" of an object or, indeed, of oneself (Saville 2008: 338). Such artists and novelists represent their subject matter in an unrealistically idealized light. By doing so, they treat themselves to gratifying emotional experiences. Joseph Kupfer notes that sentimentalists are self-reflexive—their emotions are primarily directed towards things like animals, children, bygone times, and landscapes, but secondarily yield a satisfying image of themselves as someone with such feelings (Kupfer 1996: 545). The sentimentalist experiences tender emotions *and* they enjoy themselves enjoying those emotions.

It's difficult to say what the untruthfulness of sentimental art consists in if one is working with a binary conception of truth and falsity—we're a long way from "there's a cat on the mat" and closer to questions like "is that adaptation of *Hedda Gabler* faithful?" The accusation is that sentimental artists represent their subject matter in a limited way, divorced from complexities or imperfections that would mitigate the tender emotions that simpler representations inspire. As Solomon notes:

> What makes Bouguereau kitsch is the one-dimensional purity of the emotion. These girls don't do any of the nasty things that little children do. They don't whine. They don't tease the cat. They don't hit each other. They don't have any bruises. They aren't going to die. The art gives us a false portrait, a carefully edited portrait that limits our vision and restricts our sense of reality (Solomon 1991: 5)

But the fact that Bouguereau selects one moment to represent and not another does not make his paintings deceptive. It's not as if two little girls have never sat on a hillside in pretty dresses playing grass-flute. An artist representing a single scene is in a sense forced by his medium to be selective—no painting can exhaustively represent little girls in all possible modes of appearance, mood, activity, or personality. Following Iris Murdoch, we might note that reality is inexhaustibly particular such that the task of bringing something fully into view is an "endless task," perfection impossible to achieve in practice (Murdoch 1962/1998: 333). In *Practical Criticism*, Richards defends the selectivity of sentimental art by noting that "inhibition"

[3] See Solomon (1991) for an extended discussion of these charges.

is necessary if content is to have form and if we are to have any sense of “order or proportion…Therefore the opinion sometimes emitted that all inhibition (or repression) is bad, is at the least an overstatement” (Richards 1930: 268).

Even if selectivity is necessary to art, it may be that sentimental selections are especially untruthful. In his defense of sentimentality, Solomon asserts that this would be unfair. Bouguereau was certainly one-sided in what he selected to paint—the artist was documented as claiming that he saw no point in reproducing what is ugly in life—but it is not clear that an artist is less one-sided if what he selects is awkward, grotesque, harsh or violent (Solomon 1991: 5). Mary Midgley notes that sentimentality is a close cousin of *brutality*—a tendency to represent reality in a one-sidedly cynical light. She writes, “The difference is just that they do it, not to let the reader feel soft-hearted, but to let him feel pleasingly tough and ruthless” (Midgley 1979: 385).[4] Singling out sentimentality for censure smacks of prejudice against tender emotionality and the artworks that express it (Knight 1999).

Furthermore, representing a moment of gentle play between little girls is a far cry from asserting that little girls never roughhouse. If a one-sidedly sentimental artist isn’t falsely representing reality, what does the purported untruthfulness of sentimental selectivity consist in? More might be said about the propagandistic or stereotype-perpetuating roles that such artworks can play. But when we restrict ourselves to thinking about the moral significance of the artist’s attitude towards his subject matter, it is harder to say just what (if anything) is morally wrong with sentimentally selective representation as such.

At least one part of an answer to this could lie in sentimentality’s purported selfishness. This is the second standard criticism. In *Meaning of Modern Art*, Karsten Harries writes that “kitsch creates illusion for the sake of self-enjoyment” (Harries 1968: 80). Sentimental art is, for Harries, like a love whose object is oneself being in love and not the other person. Many cite Milan Kundera’s description of kitsch to illuminate this dynamic. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, he writes:

> Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: how nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch (Kundera 1984: 251).

There is a sense in which the sentimental artist not only selects one dimension of reality to represent; he is motivated to do so for the sake of enjoying the gratifying idea of himself implied by his selection. Saville adds that one might also be attracted to a reassuring idea of the world (Saville 2008: 339).

It may be true that accusing someone of sentimentality implies accusing them of selfishness. But it is possible to think that sentimentality is sometimes morally bad without also thinking that self-indulgence itself is morally problematic. To see

[4] This echoes a similar statement from Richards, who writes, “The man who, in reaction to the commoner naïve forms of sentimentality, prides himself upon his hard-headedness and hard-heartedness, his hard-boiledness generally, and seeks out or invents aspects with a bitter or squalid character, for no better reason than this, is only displaying a more sophisticated form of sentimentality” (Richards 1930: 268).

this, let's turn our attention to another form that it can take: pride. Imagine that Bouguereau's reason for painting little girls was that this subject matter tested his talents, his achievements filling him with pride. One who thinks sentimentality is sometimes morally bad might consistently be silent about Bouguereau's selfishly motivated selectivity. Similarly, Mark Jefferson points out that some thrill seekers pursue risky activities so as to enjoy feelings of exhilaration. They may even cultivate this emotion by dwelling on the dangers to the exclusion of thinking about the safety measures in place. This can, on his view, be morally benign (Jefferson 1983: 524). The sheer fact that sentimentalists have selfish motivations for representing a subject matter as they do cannot account for the badness of bad sentimentality.

According to some, the badness of sentimental self-indulgence is a function of *inaction*. Michael Tanner, for example, notes that the sentimentalist is sometimes one who *wallows*—for example, upon tragic events in distant lands—and is too busy enjoying their own feelings of "righteous indignation" to do anything practical about it. They "avoid following up their responses with *appropriate* actions, or [when] they do follow them up appropriately, it is adventitious" (Tanner 1976–1977: 140).[5] We can, however, imagine situations where we would criticize someone for being sentimental without our concern being with action or inaction at all. Returning to the father whose child wants to take public transit on her own for the first time, we can imagine a case where he exercises restraint and allows her to go (despite expecting her to fail and need him to rescue her). Were she to learn about her father's low expectations, she might still feel discouraged by his lack of confidence and failure to take notice of her accomplishments. If simply seeing someone in an unsentimental light sometimes matters morally, inaction or compromised decision-making cannot be all that distinguishes benign from bad sentimentality.

Despite casting his net too narrowly, Tanner touches on something important in his discussions of wallowing. His insight can be refined by turning away from overt action to the private activities of consciousness. One who can be described as 'wallowing' is someone who is engaged in the feeling of their feelings and the enjoying of a selective representation, and this is where they linger. One activity that is arrested is that which enables us to overcome one-sided, idealistic, simplistic, gratifying, or consoling representations of a given subject matter. One who wallows in sentimentality forestalls *attention*. Matthew Kieran acknowledges this, noting that the sentimentalist becomes criticizable when his enjoyment of an idealization involves "willfully averting attention" from what is less savoury and "remaining blind to the darker aspects" of a subject matter. It is on his view, however, an epistemic error rather than a moral failure (Kieran 2016: 159).

The distinction between bad and benign sentimentality cannot be plausibly drawn by appealing to the badness of one-dimensional or selective representation unless we defend the further view that any single snapshot violates reality in a morally criticizable way. We lose the distinction altogether if we appeal to the badness of

[5] Mary Midgley advances a version of this criticism, claiming that indulging in a sentimental view of a subject matter—and selective representation more generally—risks undermining our ability to deal with the world as it is (Midgley 1979: 385).

indulging in pleasant emotional experiences (and would be forced to moralize over much besides sentimentality). To restrict our view to decision-making, action, and inaction would exclude cases where what is morally objectionable is the sentimentalist's unwillingness to see the other as they are. What is wanting is an account of bad sentimentality as a failure of attention that does not cast it as a merely epistemic error or vice and that buffers against moralistic overreach.

To supply this, I will first develop a positive view of the ideal of *un*sentimentality. With this in view, we will be better situated to account for the significance of falling short of this ideal as artists and ordinary human beings, why the ideal is so difficult to live up to in practice, and when falling short of it warrants full-blown moral criticism. For this, I turn first to Rilke's *Letters on Cézanne* wherein he characterizes the artist as an exemplar of unsentimentality. Rilke did not develop his observations of the painter into general reflections about moral goodness or failing, but Iris Murdoch cites the poet's discussions of Cézanne's unsentimentality in her writings on the ethics of attention.[6] His writings are thus a bridge that help us to see Murdoch's relevance to the question of sentimentality's moral significance even though she does not discuss it at length in her work.[7]

3 Cézanne's "Untiring, Objective Wakefulness"

During his almost daily visits to a Parisian exhibition of Cézanne's work in autumn of 1907, Rilke discovered a new way of seeing the world—and with it a new contrast between two ways that an artist could relate to a subject.[8] In the first, the artist's habits, preferences and associations are allowed to shape what he represents and how. In the second, what one does is in service of faithfully representing the subject itself, just as it is. Whereas the first relation comes naturally, the second is demanding and requires active discipline. Finally, while the first is self-indulgent, the second is characterized as both objective and loving.

Rilke notes that Cézanne treated familiar everyday objects like cooking apples as worthy of his painterly attention. That is to say, he did not represent them merely as symbols pointing beyond themselves to some "secondary significance" (e.g., the memory of a gala dinner or even how nice they might be to eat). As Rilke puts it, "they cease to be edible altogether, that's how thinglike and real they become, how simply indestructible in their stubborn thereness" (Rilke 1985: 32–33). Cézanne revealed the independent reality of the ordinary objects, landscapes, and persons he painted.

[6] See for example Murdoch's "The Idea of Perfection" (1962/1998: 332–333) and "The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts" (1967/1998: 348).

[7] Murdoch discusses sentimentality in passing in her 1970 interview with Brian Magee (Murdoch 1970a/1998: 14). She does not, however, explicitly discuss sentimentality as a moral failure of attention.

[8] In my treatment of Rilke's letters, my focus is not on Cézanne's innovations in visual representation as such; for a sustained discussion of this, see Fredriksson (2022: 131–163).

This was no mean feat—Rilke notes how natural it is for one's attention to be captured by what one loves *about* something like the taste of an apple and to lose sight of the simple fact of its being there. Rilke intuits Cézanne's continuous frustration with his efforts and suspicion of his own instincts, noting that he seemed "in a constant rage, in conflict with every single one of his paintings" (Rilke 1985: 34). To maintain a disciplined attention, the painter seemed to have treated his subjects as if they were conscious interlocutors who could speak for themselves and contradict him. Rilke imagines the artist's process thus:

> I think there was a conflict, a mutual struggle between the two procedures of, first, looking and confidently receiving, and then of appropriating and making personal use of what has been received; that the two, perhaps as a result of becoming conscious, would immediately start opposing each other, talking out loud, as it were, and go on perpetually interrupting and contradicting each other (Rilke 1985: 36)

This reveals an important aspect of Cézanne's relation to his subject matter. He did not "confidently receive" the visual scene in one glance and then complacently go to work—the apples or Mont Sainte Victoire were not just given one brief chance to speak and thereafter forbidden from correcting misunderstandings. Cézanne's gaze would return repeatedly, allowing the objects in the scene to protest against his initial impressions. Rilke understood the artist's works as expressions of his "simple truthfulness" which manifested itself in the vigilant return of his attention to his subjects and conviction that they exceeded his ideas of them. Rilke describes this as a "humble" and "untiring, objective wakefulness" (Rilke 1985: 85).

Relatedly, Cézanne helped Rilke to understand what it means for an artist to love something without self-indulgence. It is here that we see the figure of the sentimentalist appear as an explicit contrast case. For "the painter of sentiments" (and prior to encountering Cézanne, for Rilke too), nature serves merely as a source of private inspiration; it evokes or symbolizes something beyond itself and sweeps the sentimentalist away to their own pleasing thoughts and feelings. Cézanne's work revealed to Rilke that "I was not yet sitting before her…I walked about and saw, not nature but the visions she gave me" (Rilke 1985: 49). For the sentimentalist, the reality of the natural scene recedes behind what it inspires in the artist's fancy. Rilke contrasts this with the direct confrontation of "sitting before" something—it is the latter relation that enables the sorts of conflictual conversation that Cézanne took pains to initiate. The sentimentalist does not welcome *talking back*; they find something moving, delightful, or inspiring and their attention drops off there—but the subject always has more to say.

Rilke notices that sentimentalist painting announces *that* the artist was inspired but does not convey the independent reality of that which did the inspiring. Cézanne revealed to him that one's love of something like a landscape could be self-effacing rather than self-announcing. Loving something, one could paint as if to say:

> 'Here it is.' In which case everyone must see for himself whether or not I loved it… [Love is] thoroughly exhausted in the action of making; there is no residue. It may be that this emptying out of love in anonymous work, which pro-

duces such pure things, was never achieved as completely as in the work of this old man (Rilke 1985: 51).

For Cézanne, there was no need to curate or compose the elements of the scene or to showcase those aspects of it pleasing to his tastes—the cooking apples or simple hillside were regarded as worthy in themselves. His paintings were *manifestations* of his love for something real and independent—not dubious *declarations* of love (like those of a superficial romantic who fixates on how good his sweetheart makes him feel). As Antony Fredriksson and Silvia Panizza put it, “There is a difference between seeing something through love and seeing one’s love in something (we could call the latter sentimentalism)” (Fredriksson and Panizza 2022: 29).

Cézanne showed Rilke how an artist’s love of their subject could be expressed through a humble, vigilant attention to it as something existing independently of one’s subjective habits, preferences, and associations. Cezanne was willing to face and to be challenged by what he loved. Rilke’s descriptions of this artist-subject relation are rife with familiar moral concepts. Absent, however, is any indication that something goes morally wrong when “the painter of sentiments” allows his imagination to carry him away from the visual scene before him to private visions. Rilke describes a difference, but gives no indication that someone betrays an apple by differing from Cézanne in how they paint it.

Furthermore, we do not get the sense from Rilke that Cézanne’s “untiring, objective wakefulness” generalizes beyond efforts to represent the sheer existence of physical entities. His metaphors of facing and conversing are, however, suggestive. Might there be human realities that we find it difficult to face and conversations we should initiate but instead avoid so as not to have our daydreams disrupted or habits called into question? In such contexts, what might we say about someone who differs from Cézanne, i.e., who is complacent, whose efforts to see things as they are flag quickly (if they even begin), and who lives in a private dream-world?

Murdoch makes good on these suggestions. In her work, she presents Cézanne as an exemplar of the activity of moral attention. For her, the challenges and achievements of attention are common between artists and non-artists. To neither does attention come naturally; she writes “this is not easy, and requires, in art and morals, a discipline” (Murdoch 1969/1998: 348). In both cases, this is explained by appealing to how “social convention and neurosis” operate in us (Murdoch 1959a/1998: 216). And in both cases, what we achieve by resisting these forces is a kind of realism or objectivity that can also aptly be called “love.” For this reason, the example set by a painter like Cézanne can show us something important but easily overlooked about moral life. As she puts it, “Good art shows us how difficult it is to be objective by showing us how differently the world looks to an objective vision” (Murdoch 1967/1998: 371).

A good, unsentimental artist illuminates moral goodness and its connection with attention, but there are important differences. A capacity for objectivity towards apples and landscapes does not imply exemplarity in, say, one’s relationships with women. Murdoch writes, “We are admittedly specialised creatures where morality is concerned and merit in one area does not seem to guarantee merit in another. The good artist is not necessarily wise at home, and the concentration camp guard

can be a kindly father" (Murdoch 1967/1998: 379). Furthermore, subject matters do not all challenge us to the same extent. The independent existence of a hillside is not usually threatening; being challenged in one's painterly inclinations or forced to turn away from the rosy-cheeked shepherdesses of one's daydreams might be irksome, but it doesn't typically destabilize a painter's sense of self.[9] Human realities are more complicated and demanding; they activate our selfishness in deeper and more "frenzied" ways (Murdoch 1967/1998: 374–375). Murdoch's ethics of attention develops the basic features of Rilke's ideal of unsentimental love while also exploring the considerable challenges of living up to it in relation to human beings. The result is a nuanced picture of human frailty and need that explains why it would sometimes be moralistic to judge others for falling short of Cézanne's example.

4 The Ethics of Attention

In our ordinary ways of speaking, 'attention' is not always used to describe something morally valuable.[10] As Silvia Caprioglio Panizza points out, I can pay attention spitefully or can have my attention captured by my surroundings in a "neutral, passive" way. Murdoch is interested in how our construal of a subject matter is conditioned both by what she calls "personal vision"—one's historically formed understanding of concepts, sensibilities, and beliefs about the nature of reality—as well as by selfish attachments that keep that vision fixed at the expense of truths that one would sooner avoid. Moral attention is distinguished by what it is motivated by (love), what it is directed towards (something real and independent of the self), and what in us it resists (our powerful attachments to consoling or gratifying fantasies) (Caprioglio Panizza 2022: 158–160). When Murdoch celebrates "truthfulness," "objectivity," and "realism," what she has in view is an orientation on the world achieved when we're willing to resist the egoistic part of the self.

This willingness to look again and see things as they really are (painful though this may be) is an important way that we recognize others' value as individual human beings. Murdoch calls it "love." It may be true, as philosophers of love point out, that lovers typically desire their beloved's wellbeing (and act from concern for it), yearn for their company (and seek it out), and admire their positive qualities (and wax lyrical).[11] Murdoch does not directly comment on the adequacy of analyses of love that centre on one or more of these dispositions. Rather, she invites us to see

[9] Murdoch further notes that the beauty of nature is one of the "most accessible" sites for the overcoming of selfishness. In activities as familiar as going for country walks, "we take a self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals, birds, stones and trees" (Murdoch 1967/1998: 369–370).

[10] Murdoch acknowledges this in "The Idea of Perfection," stating her wish to restrict her use of 'attention' to good instances and to use 'looking' more neutrally (implying that this is not a distinction we ordinarily mark in our use of these words) (Murdoch 1962/1998: 329). According to Lawrence Blum (2012), she is not always consistent in her efforts.

[11] David Velleman characterizes this as the idealized view that love "necessarily entails a desire to 'care and share,' or to 'benefit and be with'" (Velleman 1999: 353). It can be found in both Harry Frankfurt's "Some Thoughts about Caring" (1998) and Robert Nozick's *The Examined Life* (1989).

that they are all compatible with failing to both see and value one's beloved just as they are. Even someone who thinks highly of their beloved and makes material sacrifices for their sake might be selfish in how they regard them—fixating on what they like, avoiding what they dislike or find threatening, or taking comfort in the idea that they have their beloved all figured out. If someone's love depends on seeing their beloved unrealistically (e.g., as perfect or as an extension of themselves) then this calls its quality into question.[12] Cézanne's example illuminates that our capacity to say of something "here it is" rather than "this is what I like about it"—to be *unsentimental* in one's love—can express an unselfish willingness to give up the path of least resistance for the sake of another. What Murdoch adds is a sense that we are more attached to unrealistic ways of seeing other human beings than we are to sentimental visions of fruit. There is usually more at stake. To see this, let's consider why she describes love as "the extremely difficult recognition that something other than oneself is real" (Murdoch 1959a/1998: 215).[13]

On Murdoch's view, when we truly love another human being, we take them to have a "right to exist" *as they exist* (Murdoch 1959b/1998: 284). Throughout her discussions of realism in the representation of character in novels, she variously describes human beings as "contingent separate other people"; "messy", and "historical" (Murdoch 1959b/1998: 269–274) and as "substantial, impenetrable, individual, indefinable, and valuable" (Murdoch, 1961/1998: 294). Loving someone realistically is difficult in part because these human realities can be difficult for us to acknowledge and accept. Love can mean resisting the temptation to hold the other to exacting standards and to condemn them for failings they acquired over the course of a difficult upbringing; without denying their imperfections, it regards the beloved with compassion. This can call on us to confront the unfair historical contingencies of life. Love can mean resisting jealousy and accepting that our loved ones have separate lives and may freely choose paths that lead them away from us. It can demand that we face our own lack of centrality in the life of someone important to us. Love can mean resisting the temptation to compare and rank different worldviews and ways of life, accepting that our beloved has a "separate mode of being which is important and interesting to themselves." Despite the attractions of orderliness and black and white answers, love meets human diversity with curiosity, not condemnation. For Murdoch, "Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness" (Murdoch 1959a/1998: 216).

There is in Murdoch's conception of loving attention a strong emphasis on tolerance. Both senses of this concept are relevant. To love someone is to accept human difference. It is also a willingness to endure the pain that comes with facing difficult realities that we might encounter in attending and to give up ways of seeing the

[12] For discussion of idealizing love and love that denies difference as degenerate forms, see Jamieson (2024).

[13] For further elaborations of what Murdoch means by this phrase, see Hopwood (2017); Cordner (2022); Jamieson (2023).

world that make us feel secure, important, confident, or oriented. To value someone as an individual is to be willing to risk this for their sake.[14]

Love is "extremely difficult"—and perfectly unwavering truthfulness impossible—because selfish aversion to threatening truths like these is built into the human psyche. For us, "fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings" (Murdoch 1969/1998: 341). This is a truth Murdoch takes to have been discovered by Freud. Our vision of the world is "not normally a transparent glass through which it views the world, but a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain" (Murdoch 1967/1998: 364). Although we are capable of loving attention, this is only achieved by resisting "the fat relentless ego." This part of us is shaped by personal history—we are not equally pained by the same realities and our fantasy lives are idiosyncratic. It operates continuously but obscurely in the background of our conscious awareness (Murdoch 1969/1998: 341–344). It is "continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world" (Murdoch 1967/1998: 369).

While the terminology of "ego" and "selfishness" can make what we gain from fantasy seem trivial and dispensable (surely less valuable that *truth*), Murdoch allows that fantasy serves important psychological needs (Murdoch 1970b/1998: 233). We sometimes need to manage the pain of living in a disordered and chancy world full of diverse and imperfect people with wills of their own. Fantasy can console or gratify that part of us that craves security, self-esteem, and meaning and that suffers when these things are undermined by difficult realities. Moreover, fantasy can take different forms and implicate our willingness to be objective to different extents. Fantasy is sometimes a temporary withdrawal that helps us take the edge off. Let's call these 'escapist fantasies.' In other cases, the "falsifying veil" is treated as a faithful representation of self, other, and world. Let's call these 'enclosing fantasies.'

We sometimes indulge in escapist fantasies by creating or enjoying art. As we've seen, Murdoch has particular views about what makes an artist exemplary. The great artist is disciplined and struggles to balance two requirements: first, to be selective and impose some form on their subject matter (e.g., shaping events into a story rather than presenting a senseless assortment of disconnected detail); and second, to minimize "offenses against truth" (Murdoch 1970a/1998: 7)[15] "Bad" or "mediocre" art is created when artists lack this discipline; they give free play to fantasy and their selections are driven by private wishes, fears, and aversions. Despite describing this qualitative difference, Murdoch does not hold the view that we should always avoid lesser artworks. Some art is inspiring and morally energizing, but art is not purely for education. It's also "fun and for fun…literature interests us on different levels in different fashions" (Murdoch 1970a/1998: 4). She notes, "As far as we can see into

[14] For a sustained discussion of how this differs from valuing someone as a rational will, see Jamieson (2024).

[15] For an extended discussion of Murdoch's views on the tension between form and "contingency" in art, see Antonaccio (2012: 52–73).

the human future there will doubtless be bad novels, cheering people up and probably not doing them too much harm" (Murdoch 1970b/1998: 233–234). Bad art can be dangerous—it is always possible that, like the prisoners in Plato's cave, we'll see shadows cast by puppets on the wall and "take these shadows to be the whole of reality" (Murdoch 1967/1998: 382). But perhaps that's why it can be more dangerous to read novels that hew close to reality but still obscure it in important ways.[16] It's sometimes obvious when a fantasy is a fantasy.

Escapist art like thrillers and romances reveal what ideas of self, circumstance, and world their authors find attractive. They are stories with heroes who are perfectly "brave, generous, indomitable, lovable" and whose adventures end in conquest and reward (Murdoch 1970a/1998: 11–13). James Bond is never awkward or incompetent. His heart is rarely fully engaged or broken.[17] Consumers of Ian Fleming's spy novels often know they're reading for enjoyment, not to learn about the varieties of human experience or international relations. It is difficult to mistake his femme fatales for real women—Fleming (1959) does not give his readers the sense that Pussy Galore has a life of her own when she's not interacting with the plot of *Goldfinger*. The sheer fact that we sometimes cheer ourselves up by indulging in escapist fantasy does not implicate our willingness to come back down to earth. While Cézanne's untiring objective wakefulness may be a moral ideal worth aspiring towards, our energies are limited and we're bound to have moments of weakness. Human beings need rest. According to Murdoch, the enjoyment of "ordinary mediocre art" such as "a sentimental novel can be a decent rest from one's troubles" (Murdoch 1970a/1998: 14). What matters is our willingness to wake up and resume objectivity for the other's sake.

The second, enclosing kind of fantasy compromises our objectivity to a greater extent than escapism. Rather than temporary withdrawals from reality, they rigidly stand in for it. As Murdoch writes:

> [We] may fail to see the individual because we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own into which we try to draw things from outside, not grasping their reality and independence, making them into dream objects of our own (Murdoch 1959a/1998: 216).

Authors of spy-thrillers may or may not believe that the world is full of turncoats, femme fatales, and double-agents or that constant vigilance is a virtue. I don't know how Ian Fleming saw the real women in his life. But some people don't just withdraw into cynical fantasies like these—they inhabit them and maintain them at the expense of real individuals. Consider a jealous boyfriend whose bleak ideas about women's untrustworthiness shape how he sees his own girlfriend. She seems

[16] Murdoch is more worried by novels that present the realities of human evil only to inspire self-obsessive fascination with one's own unsavoury motives and sado-masochistic guilt. The enjoyable suffering we feel when dwelling on our own failings can be a dangerous distraction and inhibit our attention to others (Murdoch 1969/1998: 355).

[17] There is one striking exception. In Fleming's *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1963), Bond falls in love with and marries a woman who is killed mere hours after their wedding. I'm grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention.

to enjoy his company and to care about him, she has expressed her commitment to exclusivity, and she has never been caught in a lie. None of this shakes his view that she is, qua woman, a snake in the grass and liable to betray him if left unsupervised. This cynical view makes him feel safe from humiliation—in his fantasy world, he is the shrewd, Bond-like protagonist who will never be caught off guard—but his attachment to this inhibits attention to the woman he purports to love. The jealous boyfriend is not merely taking a rest from the more troubling aspects of reality; he's committed to dreaming. The rigidity of this enclosing fantasy implicates the quality of his love.[18]

Murdoch's ethics of attention give us a rich vocabulary for thinking about what goes wrong when fantasy is an enclosure rather than a momentary escape. Moral attention is characterized by the recognition of another's value qua the human individual that they are in all their threatening otherness. This is expressed in the unselfish willingness to risk visions of others that console and gratify by attending truthfully. When we love another, we are willing to tolerate painful realities for their sake. When we engage in acts of moral attention, this speaks to how we value the other relative to how we value our own felt needs and wishes.

Moral failures of attention can be described in terms of selfishness, untruthfulness, attachment to fantasy, and the relative undervaluation of real individuals. One places disproportionate value on one's senses of self and security relative to how one values others. This is expressed in one's unwillingness to put one's fantasies at risk. When we are selfish in this way, we are intolerant of difficult realities and defend ourselves against them in ways that compromise our objectivity and call the quality of our love into question. There are different forms that this self-protectiveness can take and styles of fantasy that attract us—this is a function of our personal histories and speak to what realities we find especially intolerable. What is crucial is the question of proportion. If moral attention is a form of loving sacrifice, then moral failures of attention are the sacrifice of real individuals to one's own egoistic needs.

With this in view, we can return to sentimentality and see that it does not just name a less disciplined and objective style of still life painting than that admired by Rilke. It is not merely a more dubious and gushing way of showing one's love for something than Cézanne's "here it is." It is in some cases a moral failure of attention. In what follows, I argue that Murdoch's ethics of attention can help us to identify criteria with which to distinguish benign from bad sentimentality. Thinking of sentimental idealizations as fantasies can help us to appreciate that they serve non-trivial functions in our psychic lives, that they vary in how they function (i.e., whether they are escapist or enclosing), and that not every moment of sentimentality implicates our love in the same way and with the same significance. With this in view, we can reflect on how the critical vocabulary of Murdoch's ethics of attention

[18] In this respect, we might say that Midgley and Murdoch share in the view that 'brutality' names a style of fantasy. They differ in that, while Murdoch distinguishes between escapist and enclosing fantasies, Midgley more bluntly declares that brutality is always bad. For Midgley, the brutal person distorts reality for the sake of enjoying feelings that are themselves bad; "deliberately indulging in them is odious in itself" (Midgley 1979: 386).

applies to sentimentality without losing sight of what attention can cost us or moralistically demanding that this price always be paid up front.

5 Sentimentality, Consolation, and Gratification

As we've seen, 'sentimentality' is not the name for a particular emotion but rather a complex system of emotional dispositions centring around the primary sentimentalized object. When one is sentimental, one is sentimental *about* something and this informs how one is disposed to represent that primary object (i.e., in a one-dimensionally idealizing way) and what one feels towards it (e.g., tenderness, affection, pity, or solicitude). When we represent something as precious, beautiful, perfect, innocent, or vulnerable, this also informs how we feel towards and represent third parties, ourselves, and the world. Finally, sentimentality is in some sense enjoyable and this is part of the explanation for why sentimentality is attractive.

Sentimental idealizations can quite readily be thought of as fantasies in Murdoch's sense of the term. Selective representations of this kind can be gratifying. This aspect was central to Kundera's description of kitsch, where the unmitigated "niceness" of children running on the grass became "kitsch" when the observer took it as an occasion to reflect on and feel moved by his own tender-heartedness. Similarly, when one represents a primary object as innocent or defenseless, this enables one to see oneself as heroic insofar as one champions their cause or comes to their aid. Werner Herzog attributes sentimentality of this kind to Timothy Treadwell in his 2005 documentary *Grizzly Man*. Treadwell was an American environmentalist and bear enthusiast who spent 13 summers living among the grizzlies of Katmai National Park and Preserve in Alaska. He recorded footage of himself and the local wildlife that Herzog would later use in his film. Throughout this time, Treadwell gave affectionate names to individual bears, commenting on their different dispositions and his strategies for managing aggression when in close proximity. Despite acknowledging their aggression towards each other and their disposition to eat their fellow bears and attack other wildlife, Herzog claims that Treadwell retained a "sentimentalized view that everything out there was good and the universe in balance and in harmony" (Herzog 2005). This view informed his self-understanding. In one of his recordings, Treadwell characterizes himself as a "warrior" defending a sacred place from human encroachment, declaring, "I would die for these animals" (Herzog 2005).

Focusing on gratification alone is, however, reductive. It may be that sentimentality is sometimes motivated by the attractions of egoistic pleasure. Murdoch's reflections invite us to consider that the selfishness of sentimentality, like that of fantasy, is more complex than this. Fantasies can also be *consoling*; they help us to mitigate deeply painful emotions. Generally speaking, idealizations are a familiar source of comfort; imagining that one's surgeon is a miracle worker (and that one's upcoming operation is sure to be a success) can help to offset the terror one feels in a

life-threatening situation.[19] Sentimental idealizations sometimes share this structure. Viewing others one-dimensionally as victims, innocents, dependents, or sanctuaries (and oneself as the one who pities, protects, or preserves) can stave off overwhelming feelings of loss, disorientation, and worthlessness.

We see this when we place Treadwell's sentimentality in context. Prior to his first summer living among the grizzly bears, he suffered long stints of unemployment, alcoholism, and drug addiction. After declaring his willingness to put his life on the line for the sake of the animals at Katmai, Treadwell states that in human society, "I had no life; and now I have a life" (Herzog 2005). Sentimentalizing the Alaskan wilderness did not provide Treadwell with trivial enjoyment; it seems to have relieved him from deep feelings of worthlessness. This is common in cases of sentimentality. Viewing one's child unrealistically as a dependent little girl might be merely gratifying; but for parents whose identity is closely bound up with playing a particular role in their child's life, the fantasy enables them to stave off the pain of losing their identity and the sense of purpose that comes with it. It is no coincidence that we associate parental sentimentality with events symbolic of a child's development and increasing independence (e.g., starting daycare, moving out of the family home, marriage). Similarly, the disposition to idealize one's hometown might be most pronounced when one is living in a strange new place and feeling insignificant. It can be consoling to imagine that home will always be a friendly and familiar place that one can return to.

Murdoch's reflections on the different forms that fantasy take—running the gamut from escapist to enclosing fantasies—help us to notice significant differences among instances of sentimentality. In the first category, we might place cases where individuals self-consciously induce sentimental feelings in themselves by engaging with sentimental art. On some level, I know that little girls are often rowdier, messier, and less graceful than those painted by Bouguereau. His paintings don't confuse me about the reality of children or dispose me to love my niece less when she makes up crass songs about bodily functions. I might nevertheless find solace in thinking that despite the violence and cruelty of our world, there are some like the little girls represented by Bouguereau who've been protected from premature exposure to it.

While Murdoch doesn't specifically speak of fantasies about real individuals as acceptable tools for emotional self-regulation, we can imagine sentimentality of this kind being similarly temporary and self-conscious. The dad who adopts an overprotective posture towards his adult "little girl" on the eve of her wedding might know that she can ably navigate the challenges of married life—we can imagine his threatening promises to keep an eye on her husband being made without a serious intention to supervise her marriage. Representing her in a sentimental light serves as a temporary reprieve; in the cold light of day, he will try to make peace with his

[19] In *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis*, Nancy McWilliams lists idealization as a defense mechanism common between children (who tend to impute special power to their parents to mitigate their own feelings of vulnerability) and adults, in whom this defensive strategy shows through in "phenomena like the insistence that one's lover is perfect, one's personal guru is infallible, one's school is the best, one's taste is unassailable, one's government incapable of error, and similar illusions" (McWilliams 2011: 109).

changing role in the life of his daughter. This is an escapist fantasy. In other cases, however, sentimental representations stand rigidly in for reality. The father who will not consider the possibility that his “little girl” can successfully navigate public transit without his help may be coping with similar anxieties as the bride’s dad, but without his flexibility. The consoling idea that his daughter will be lost without him inhibits his acknowledgement of her growing independence. He is not and *will not* be objective, making the child he purports to love into a “dream object.”

Murdoch’s reflections help us to appreciate the nature of the untruthfulness and selfishness involved in sentimentality by inviting us to consider both the human need for fantasy and the connection between moral attention and love. Someone who indulges in sentimental fantasy need not be untruthful in the sense of falsely representing reality. Sentimental untruthfulness refers to an unwillingness to see some aspect of reality that would compromise one’s fantasy. In determining whether sentimentality is bad or benign, what we want to know is how unwilling the sentimentalist is and how this implicates their love of the primary object. Are there circumstances under which they *would* take notice of the others’ fantasy-threatening qualities and tolerate the loss that comes with this, or are they rigidly attached to fantasy? What we need to determine is what this says about the quality of the sentimentalist’s will. Representing the world in a self-indulgently selective way might call our willingness to know the truth into question—as Kieran notes, it is epistemically criticizable. What it says about our willingness to prioritize others is less straightforward. In assessing the selfishness of sentimentality, we must consider the importance of what is gained through selective representation. Is it trivial like mere gratification or non-trivial like the offsetting of overwhelming feelings of grief, anxiety, or disorientation? To determine whether someone’s priorities are objectionably selfish, we also want to know what has been sacrificed for the sake of these gains.

6 When Attention Really Counts

A final consideration relevant to distinguishing between benign and bad sentimentality is the value of what fantasy is prioritized over. How important is it to be seen unsentimentally and for the other to be willing to take notice of aspects of us that conflict with their sentimental idealizations? There are two ways of construing ‘importance’ here. Moral attention may be important because it promotes independently valuable outcomes. It may also be important as such. By exploring examples of each of these, I’ll specify some considerations relevant to determining whether a given failure of attention is objectionably selfish.

Being morally attended to can be important to someone because their flourishing depends on the other’s care.[20] As we saw in Tanner’s discussion of “wallowing”,

[20] While the focus of this paper has been the moral badness of sentimentality in relation to the primary object, it is worth mentioning the way that idealizing one object can be connected to dispositions to treat secondary objects with brutality. Jefferson describes this in connection to the dynamics of racist prejudice depicted in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (Jefferson 1983: 527–529).

we sometimes think that sentimentality is bad because of the effect that it has on the sentimentalist qua moral agent. On his view, the emotionality of sentimentality undermines the reliability of our moral judgment such that we can't be trusted to do the right thing. An attention-based account of sentimentality can arrive at similar conclusions. In Eva Feder Kittay's defense of the ethics of care, she emphasizes the importance of "open responsiveness to the other" and "attentiveness" (Kittay 2011: 52–53). Whereas an inattentive person might assume that he knows what it means to care for someone well, attentiveness to the other as an individual can reveal that their actual needs and interests are not what he originally thought; similarly, their capacity to cooperate in or independently perform particular activities might surprise. An openness to this can make the difference between negligence or paternalism and ethical care.

When moral attention is inhibited by attachment to sentimental idealizations, we risk our care misfiring in these ways. For example, the father who is attached to the view that his daughter needs him to escort her on the bus to the library might act paternalistically, insulating her from risk rather than empowering her to navigate the relevant risks safely on her own. This deprives her of something she values: going to the library when she wants to, which is more often than her parents can take her. But as Scanlon points out, having one's choices limited for one's own protection can also deprive one of important opportunities to shape one's own life and express one's own values. Furthermore, it can contribute to one's being stigmatized as immature or incompetent (Scanlon 2000: 254). A parent who forbids their teenager from dating might see themselves as protecting a babe in the woods from getting hurt. Doing so, however, might deprive the teen of valuable opportunities to work out what they are looking for in a relationship and whether they even want to date (perhaps friendship is more of a priority in their life). Being forbidden from an activity that most of one's peers are permitted to participate in can moreover be humiliating.

Attachment to a view of one's child as immature and incompetent can lead to misfires of care. We are not, however, always responsible for caring for the individuals we are sentimental towards; not everyone is vulnerable to being harmed by our paternalism or neglect. If we imagine that the dad who waxes sentimental on the eve of his daughter's wedding is relatively powerless to overprotectively restrict her freedom or neglect her—if we imagine that she is relatively self-sufficient, her social status is not affected by her father's attitude towards her, and he cannot unilaterally impose protective measures on her—this contributes to our sense that his sentimentality is benign. The badness of sentimentality is sometimes a function of the fact that the sentimentalist is in such a position—as parent to a young child, personal support worker to a person with cognitive disabilities, guardian to a non-human animal, groundskeeper to a plot of land, or in some other role with significant care responsibilities. It is objectionably selfish to prioritize what we gain from sentimentality and to risk misfires of care in the context of a relationship wherein the sentimentalized party is vulnerable to such misfires.

This is not, however, the only reason to value moral attention and to morally criticize sentimentality. Being seen unsentimentally can as such be important to us because we care about what moral attention *means*. When a loved one comes to see us as we really are and their love is unchanged, this can be reassuring. It can

suggest that our value in their eyes does not depend on our living up to a particular ideal (e.g., of unstained purity or adorable neediness). In a thus-far sentimental relationship, this show of tolerance can make the sentimentalized party feel less afraid that they will face rejection if they reveal sides of themselves that are not gratifying to the other (e.g., their independence, competence, strength, worldliness, boisterousness, willfulness, or discordant opinions). So long as the other sees them one-dimensionally, no amount of affection or solicitude will address the open question: do they love me warts and all or would their love be extinguished by the sight of my warts? It may be that no love is unconditional; but unpunctuated sentimentality can disguise the extent of love's conditionality.[21] It can be troubling if someone we love systematically avoids situations that might puncture their fantasy (e.g., insisting on frothy banter to the exclusion of serious conversation topics).[22] In this, the distance between the sentimentalist and Cézanne—who, on Rilke's telling, sought dialogue with his subjects to check his own painterly inclinations—could not be starker. For the other to *dwell* on our flaws and foibles might not be reassuring.[23] But if we solicit the other's attention and are met with avoidance, they leave us in doubt as to whether they can tolerate us in our complexity. Sentimentality is sometimes bad to the extent that it denies our loved ones reassurance about the resilience of our love.[24]

7 Conclusion

Sentimentality is a troubling phenomenon. It has incurred the opprobrium of art critics and philosophers who see in it a lack of aesthetic taste, self-indulgence, and untruthfulness. Sentimental representations and the tender emotions they inspire can manifest a lack of discipline. Rilke would agree that sentimental artists fall short of an ideal of "untiring objective wakefulness." But Murdoch's reflections on the role of fantasy in human life invite us to see that it may sometimes be moralistic to hold individuals up to this ideal. Failures of moral attention are certainly not commendable—they reveal that we are less than perfect—but imperfection is inevitable and sometimes harmless. An epistemic moment of weakness is not necessarily morally criticizable, self-serving through it may be.

[21] Vida Yao (2020) makes a similar point, arguing that some individuals cannot trust another's love if it seems epistemically partial and, say, unrealistically downplays their flaws.

[22] There are pathological instances of this kind of "testing," wherein skeptical individuals look for proof of the others' devotion. That this can be self-defeating is a theme that Stanley Cavell finds in *King Lear* (Cavell 2015: 246–325). There is, however, a meaningful distinction to be made between the attempt to preemptively test another's love and insulate oneself from doubt and the attempt to disconfirm a particular suspicion born out of the other's unpunctuated sentimentality.

[23] For a discussion of the role of optimism in romantic relationships, see Bortolotti (2018) and Brunning (2024: 98–102). Macalester Bell (2014) makes a similar argument about the value of idealization in connection with parental love.

[24] This is only one way of understanding the non-instrumental value of moral attention. Hernandez (2021) offers a distinct account of the connection between Murdochian loving attention and the value of affirming others in stigmatized aspects of their identities.

Sentimental failures of attention are objectionably selfish when they express that we disproportionately value our own needs and interests (and the fantasies that serve them) over others. In assessing proportionality, there are a number of relevant considerations. These include: first, the value of what is gained through sentimentality and whether it is trivial (like mere gratification) or non-trivial (like consolation); how inflexibly attached to a given sentimental representation one is (whether it is an escapist fantasy or an enclosing one); and what is sacrificed for the sake of remaining within fantasy's self-serving enclosure. In some contexts, what is sacrificed might be our capacity to reliably care for those who depend on us and are vulnerable to being harmed by our neglect and paternalism. In others, what is sacrificed might be the other's sense of freedom in being themselves or becoming a less other-gratifying version of themselves. When this is the case, we might acknowledge the magnitude of the pain that the sentimentalist is holding at bay by representing the other to themselves in a sentimental light but still judge that it is selfish to do so in too protracted a way or without punctuating sentimentality with reassuring moments of realism.

In many cases, nothing like this is seriously at issue. We're sometimes indifferent to whether or not someone loves us (much less loves us unconditionally), or are so secure in our relationship with them that reassurances are unimportant to us. A surgeon, for example, would be moralistic to judge her patients for idealizing her as a miracle worker given the enormity of the fear they are thereby offsetting, her relative invulnerability to misfires of care, and her indifference to being loved by them warts and all. The same goes for judging sentimentalists. We cannot determine whether a given instance of sentimentality is bad or benign without reflecting on what failures of moral attention threaten; this can mean reflecting on the nature of the relationship between the sentimentalist and the sentimentalized individual, considering the former's responsibilities and powers and the latter's needs and vulnerabilities.

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