

# On the Relation between Epistemic Progress and Moral Progress

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## *Abstract*

Scholars assume the necessity of epistemic progress (EP) for moral progress (MP), where EP involves forming more accurate moral judgments. This is problematic, since we lack the cognitive control necessary to form accurate moral judgments (Klenk & Sauer 2021). Thus, if it is true that EP is necessary for MP, and if it is true that we are naturally bad epistemic agents, then MP is impossible. Here I consider three possible logical relations between EP and MP: (A) EP is necessary and sufficient for MP, (B) EP is necessary but not sufficient for MP, and (C) EP is neither necessary nor sufficient for MP. I argue that (A) cannot account for full MP, while (B) is a promising route if we wish to maintain both the epistemic requirement and the possibility for full MP. Finally, I argue that (C) is the only logical way to dismiss the control requirement. Drawing from Iris Murdoch, I suggest that her account of MP that *just is* EP is an original as well as a promising way to re-frame the debate in a way that allows to account for our natural lack of cognitive control, without it hindering the possibility of MP.

*Keywords:* Moral progress, Epistemic progress, Cognitive control, Epistemic vices, Un-selfing.

## 1. Introduction

Cases of societal-level moral progress include the abolition of slavery (Sauer 2023) and the disappearance of harmful traditions such as foot-binding and dueling (Appiah 2011). When it comes to the individual level, we can judge that a person has become a “better” moral agent than she used to be. Imagine a racist person who suddenly stops being racist: if we agree that not being racist is better than being racist, then we can say that this person has morally progressed, even though the change does not directly impact society at large. Now, it is likely that societal and individual moral progress are intertwined,<sup>1</sup> and one may even ques-

<sup>1</sup> Accounts of “societal moral progress” are concerned with changes for the better that take place at the level of social structures and institutions (Macklin 1977), while those of

tion whether it makes sense to distinguish between the two levels of moral progress.<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this paper, drawing such a sharp distinction is not necessary. Here I wish to focus on the following consideration: moral progress is enabled by epistemic progress: people need to *understand* something about reality, *analyze* moral concepts, *evaluate* norms, habits, beliefs and value systems to be in the position to improve them.<sup>3</sup> However, Klenk & Sauer (2021) have recently highlighted that if accounts of moral progress rest on the assumption that we can be good epistemic agents, then full moral progress is practically impossible. This is because we cannot control the impact of morally irrelevant situational factors on our moral judgments.<sup>4</sup>

Given the general agreement concerning the necessity of epistemic improvement for the possibility of moral progress and considering the point raised by Klenk & Sauer according to which attaining the kind of epistemic improvement that would allow us to form accurate moral judgments is impossible, the aim of this paper is that of inquiring on some crucial aspects of the relation between moral progress and epistemic improvement (henceforth “epistemic progress”) and offer a novel perspective on how we can morally progress notwithstanding our cognitive limitations.

The paper is divided in four sections: §2 is where I define moral progress (MP), epistemic progress (EP) and introduce the Cognitive Control challenge. In §3 I consider the possibility that EP is both necessary and sufficient for MP and argue that even if situational factors do not play a crucial role when it comes to our deliberative deficits, those deliberative deficits are still practically hard to control. Thus, if we wish to pursue this path, we cannot advocate for *full* epistemic progress and, consequently, we cannot advocate for *full* moral progress. In §4 I consider the possibility that EP is necessary but not sufficient for MP and argue that for moral progress to be a practical possibility epistemic progress needs to be accompanied by *motivation* to act. Since there are a number of theories that have now succeeded in explaining the possibility of bridging the knowledge-action gap, and they can do so without employing the necessity of cognitive control, then arguing that EP is necessary but not sufficient for MP is a promising route. In §5 I consider the following possibility: EP is neither necessary nor sufficient for MP. In order to support this, I consider Iris Murdoch’s account of both EP and MP and argue that, in her view, it is MP that is necessary and sufficient for EP, and not the other way round. If we follow her steps,

“individual moral progress” are concerned with changes for the better that take place at the personal, agential level (Moody-Adams 1999, 2017; Hermann 2019; Severini 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Schinkel & de Ruyter (2017) define individual moral progress as “the moral-psychological development of an individual”; one may thus question whether we need to call it “moral progress” while we already call it “moral development”.

<sup>3</sup> “For the better” generally expresses an implementation in moral capacities, which is a term borrowed from Buchanan & Powell (2018), who understand “narrow” conceptions of moral progress as having to do with “the exercise of human moral powers—their *capacities* for having moral concepts, making and appreciating moral arguments, being committed to moral consistency, and having moral motivations” (Buchanan & Powell 2018: 50, my italics).

<sup>4</sup> Note that this does not rule out the very possibility of moral progress; rather, it calls for attention on the very assumption that it is cognitive control that is required for moral progress.

thus, we have the chance to save the possibility of *full* individual moral progress without the cognitive control requirement.

Before proceeding, a caveat is in order. I do not wish to assume that Murdoch has something to say just about any current controversial philosophical issue: rather, what I plan to do is to argue that if we wish to save the practical possibility of individual moral progress *pace* the control requirement then a Murdochian-like account of both EP and MP may be the most promising, as well as interesting, route to take.

## 2. EP, MP and Cognitive Control

An agent can be judged to have become a better moral agent in a number of ways, depending on both one's account of what it is that counts as progress and what morality amounts to. Broadly, drawing from Egonsson's (2013) logical structure of progress, we can claim that X has made moral progress regarding Y in relation to Z, when X is the subject, Y the matter of moral progress or what the progress consists in, and Z the dimension of comparison that can be measured, or accounted for by moral theory M. We can say, for example, that Anne (X) has become less (Z) racist (Y) and that this is a good thing because this has expanded her circle of concern (M).

In a similar fashion, an agent can be judged as a "better" epistemic agent in a number of ways, depending both on one's account of what it is that counts as progress and what epistemic abilities amount to. One can have gained more accurate moral *knowledge*, have deepened one's *understanding* of moral concepts, or have developed better epistemic attitudes (e.g. curiosity, intellectual humility, etc). In all these cases, we can claim that the agent has become a better epistemic agent. Broadly, we can claim that X has made epistemic progress regarding Y in relation to Z, when X is the subject, Y the matter of epistemic progress or what the progress consists in, and Z the dimension of comparison that can be measured, or accounted for by account of epistemic ability (A). We can say, for example, that Steve (X) has become more (Z) accurate (Y) when it comes to his ability to judge situations (A). The epistemic ability to be more accurate in judging situations is, therefore, an instance of EP. Consequently, if it is true that EP is necessary for MP and if it is also true that EP in the form of accurate moral judgments is impossible, then MP is also practically impossible.

Drawing a parallel with science, Klenk & Sauer (2021) note that the underlying assumption of MP accounts is that "[c]orrect judgments are those that either better represent reality or better cohere with the rest of one's judgments. Thus, progress in science can be understood in terms of making unbiased judgments: judgments that are guided by the evidence alone. To the extent that scientific progress requires less contaminated beliefs, we should [...] expect the same within the domain of morality" (942). Cognitive control amounts to the ability to prevent our beliefs from being contaminated by irrelevant factors (what is not "evidence alone"), since un-contaminated beliefs allow to form truth-tracking judgments. As we shall expand on in §2, cognitive control in the moral domain amounts to the ability to prevent our *moral* beliefs from being contaminated by *morally irrelevant* factors, since un-contaminated moral beliefs allow to form truth-tracking moral judgments. To illustrate, if I have to decide whether to help an injured person, my judgment should not be contaminated by non-moral factors such as the cloudy weather or the music in the background.

Being able to control the impact of morally irrelevant features of the situation is, therefore, the necessary requirement for MP to come about.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, MP requires cognitive control.

We can see that if it is indeed the case that MP depends on EP, then the possibility of becoming better epistemic agents is a *necessary* condition for the possibility of becoming better moral agents. The roads to explore the relation between EP and MP are, thus, the following:

- (A) EP is necessary and sufficient for MP
- (B) EP is necessary but not sufficient for MP
- (C) EP is neither necessary nor sufficient for MP

(A) and (B) are attempts to resist, or soften the cognitive control challenge, while (C) is a possible route in virtue of the cognitive control challenge. I will begin by considering (A).

### 3. (A) EP as Necessary and Sufficient for MP

According to Klenk & Sauer, what impedes the forming of accurate moral judgments is the fact that it is impossible for us to ignore, or not being impacted by, morally irrelevant situational factors. They employ Klenk's definition of situational factors (2021: 2), where

[f]actor F is a situational factor in case C with answer options  $a^1$  (classified as utilitarian option),  $a^2$  (classified as deontological option) and  $a^n$  (for some other moral theory) if and only if F does not legitimately affect the respective normative classification of  $a^1 \dots a^n$  vis-à-vis the normative theory in question and F is not a dispositional factor of the agent (Klenk & Sauer 2021: 950).

This implies that situational factors include stress-levels—whether one is about to take the afternoon tea or an oral exam—and linguistic architectures such as wordings—groups of immigrants as being describes as “swarming” to one’s country—or even the language in which one is speaking and thinking, while they do not include personality traits and individual differences at large, such as intelligence or anti-social disorders. Situational factors are morally irrelevant factors to the extent to which they represent pieces of information that are *independent* of people’s favorite moral theories. According to this definition, it appears that “[t]he majority of the situational factors found to influence moral judgment are regular, normal features of everyday life” (2021: 952). That is, that most of the morally irrelevant situational factors that impede accurate moral judgments are found not just in mental exercises such as versions of the trolley problems—“Imagine the big person walking by”—but in real life contexts such as institutional settings and public debates. The picture that arises from Klenk & Sauer’s critical review is bleak: “People make moral judgments under stress, when they are tired, in happy states, when they feel supported by friends and family; they do so when their judgment concerns their family, friends, or themselves, they consider the consequences of their actions vividly, or not, and they make judgments in foreign languages. [...] This finding provides good reason to

<sup>5</sup> Here accounts of MP include those of Anderson 2014; Buchanan & Powell 2018; Jamieson 2017; Shermer 2016; Wilson 2010.

think that moral judgments are often not properly cognitively *controlled* in the sense that they are too easily influenced by situational factors” (2021: 943).

We may think that the very fact of knowing that we lack cognitive control may diminish the level of impact of morally irrelevant factors. However, Klenk & Sauer note that we know too little about the problem of cognitive control for a state of awareness to make any kind of difference (2021: 954). Another possibility is that if we train in that respect, we may be able to manage our lack of control, at least to some extent. There are, after all, de-biasing strategies and cognitive therapy strategies to re-wire our automatic responses to situations.<sup>6</sup> However, they reply, even if cognitive control may turn out to be not in principle impossible, “this concession is largely independent of the question of whether moral progress is possible *given our psychological constraints*” (955). It is an empirical fact that we do have psychological constraints in this respect, and it is within these psychological constraints that controlling the influence of morally irrelevant situational factors is not possible.

Now, when it comes to the impact of morally irrelevant situational factors on one’s deliberations, it is hard not to think of Situationism. Famously, Situationism presents itself as a challenge to virtue ethics, since people seem to respond to what *should be deemed* morally irrelevant situational factors rather than acting from stable and educated character traits (Doris 1998; Merritt et al. 2010; Miller 2014). A self-proclaimed altruist does not help the person in need if she is in a rush; thus, the trait of altruism either does not exist, or does not do any job. In a similar fashion, Epistemic Situationism is a challenge to character-based approaches to virtue epistemology (Fairweather & Alfano 2017): the claim becomes that we cannot explain people’s behavior in terms of intellectual character traits (e.g. open-mindedness, gullibility) because “many people do not possess creativity, flexibility and curiosity as such but inquire and reason creatively, flexibly and curiously when their moods have been elevated by such seemingly trivial and epistemically irrelevant situational influences as candy, success at anagrams, and comedy films” (Alfano 2012: 239). A self-proclaimed open-minded person is more likely to be welcoming towards new ideas if she has had a candy, rather than thanks to the intellectual trait of open-mindedness. To this, Cassam (2019) has replied arguing that these kinds of shortcomings in judgment and behavior are better explained, on the other hand, by vicious character traits (epistemic vices).

For both Situationism and the cognitive control challenge, the assumption is that morally irrelevant situational factors play a role they should not be playing when it comes to forming moral judgments, but the conclusions they reach are different: for Situationism, the conclusion is that virtue-based and character-based behavioral explanations are not supported by empirical findings, while for the cognitive control challenge the conclusion is that cognitive control is both necessary and impossible to achieve, which makes all current accounts of moral progress rest on problematic premises. However, the control requirement challenge and Situationism are worth linking together, since if shortcomings in forming judgments end up being better explained, on the other hand, by vicious character traits rather than by the external presence of situational factors, then character formation can be a way to save the possibility of MP. In what follows I will con-

<sup>6</sup> Here they quote Lilienfeld et al. 2009; Sellier et al. 2019, but see also Cassam 2019 for a review of empirical studies.

sider Cassam's argument against Epistemic Situationism and conclude that it does have to say something about the cognitive requirement challenge as well.

Cassam (2016; 2019) defines epistemic vices<sup>7</sup> as any kind of intellectual attitude that gets in the way of knowledge;<sup>8</sup> whether a cognitive shortcoming is an epistemic vice or not depends, thus, on the consequences it has on the agent's effective inquiry (2016: 166). Cassam imagines Oliver, who is a conspiracy theorist so obsessed with 9/11 that he spends most of his spare time reading about the tragedy from dubious sources and, when asked, is genuinely convinced that the terrorist attack was all an inside job (2016: 162). Why does Oliver believe this in the face of evidence that it was *not* all an inside job? The fact that Oliver would always have an answer coming from his conspiracy websites does not shed any light on the reason why he believes so. What we get to know is that he always has reasons to believe what he does, but not *why* he believes it in the first place. It is here that character comes into play, argues Cassam: Oliver's beliefs are better explained by his intellectual gullibility, cynicism and prejudice (2016: 163). And since it is those traits that obstruct his knowledge—gullible when it comes to dubious websites, cynical and prejudiced in the face of evidence—they are intellectual character vices. Intellectual character vices are, thus, mental attitudes that make us poor inquirers. What interests us here is that Cassam argues that even though situational factors such as presences of objects, mood depressors and smells might have an impact on Oliver's gullibility, they are not what ultimately *explain* his actions and beliefs (2016: 170). Empirical studies support the fact that Oliver-like examples are actually explained by the existence of a "conspiracy mentality" (Swami et al 2010; Swami et al. 2011), defined as "the general propensity to subscribe to theories blaming a conspiracy of ill-intending individuals or groups for important societal phenomena" (Bruder *et al.* 2013: 2). To put it differently, the best predictors of beliefs in a conspiracy theory is not to be found in contingent situational factors, but in beliefs in other conspiracy theories;<sup>9</sup> a person who believes that 9/11 was all an inside job is very likely to believe also that humans have never walked on the Moon and that, in general, there are people in the world whose only interest is that of fooling us all into believing "what they want us to believe". It is this very kind of thinking style that is not reducible to the influence of situational factors (see Swami *et al* 2011).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive picture on current accounts of virtue and vice epistemology, see Baehr 2011, Battaly 2015, Croce 2020. On specifically vice epistemology, see Kidd et al. 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Since Epistemic Situationism challenges the existence of intellectual character traits, in his paper "Vice Epistemology" Cassam only considers intellectual character vices, but he is clear in stating that these are not the only kind of epistemic vices one could possess (2016: 160).

<sup>9</sup> In a recent study Meyer et al. (2024) show that when it came to COVID-19 misinformation, the association between misinformation and people's epistemic vices was much stronger than the association between misinformation and other factors such as political identity and educational attainment. They argue that this finding supports the fact that vice epistemology can better account for people's intellectual shortcomings than its current competitors.

<sup>10</sup> But is conspiracy mentality an intellectual vice, then? Cassam leaves the question open, with the suggestion that if not equated, there is enough evidence to suppose that conspiracy mentality is the expression of some intellectual vices; that it, it is explained by, say, gullibility, cynicism and prejudice (2016: 172).

Assuming that this applies to other thinking styles, including those that may be at work when people form inaccurate moral judgments in public and institutional situations, if EP is necessary and sufficient for MP then EP is, first of all, possible, and once EP has taken place, then MP naturally follows. This means that improving and controlling one's epistemic vices is possible and it naturally leads to people's forming accurate moral judgments. When it comes to the possibility of EP, Cassam endorses "Qualified optimism" (2019: 171): even if some character vices such as gullibility may be resistant to self-improvement, there are strategies we can employ to manage them to some extent. The good news, claims Cassam, is that it is the very nature of epistemic vices to be modifiable (2019: 176); the difficulty in self-improving can be due to a number of factors, but it is not, in principle, an impossible quest. Attitudes, stances and affections that are expressions of intellectual character vices can be managed through strategies such as promotion of and exposure to counter-stereotypes (Blair 2002), or changing one's behavior in order to change one's implicit stances (e.g. reading more in order to manage epistemic insouciance, Cassam 2019). When it comes to thinking styles, e.g. conspiracy mentality, one strategy that comes from cognitive therapy is that of asking oneself a series of questions. For example, a person who 'catastrophizes' might ask herself if what is distressing her would matter in five years time (2019: 177; Edelman 2006), just like Oliver might ask himself if people would truly spend their precious time just to find ways to trick him. In short, Cassam argues that it is true that "[f]or the most part [...] our intellectual characters are the result of different influences over which we have little control" (2019: 179), but this does not imply that our intellectual characters are unalterable.

Nevertheless, if EP amounts to merely managing epistemic shortcomings in judgment forming, then MP would be the result of merely managed, as opposed to fully controlled, moral judgments, which makes MP look less like scientific progress and more like a still highly fallible as well as exhausting process of cognitive management. In short, even if we can dismiss Situationism in its broader scope and, thus, allow for the possibility that people's morally questionable actions and judgments are better explained by questionable character traits rather than by random situational factors, we cannot fully dismiss the Cognitive Control challenge in its "full" version, since even if situational factors may play a smaller role than one could think, the problem lies in the possibility of exercising full control over one's intellectual vices. Thus, (A) does not allow us to advance much further. However, one may think that intellectual control is not everything that there is to forming accurate, truth-tracking moral judgments, something else may be needed, which leads us to (B): EP as necessary but not sufficient for MP.

#### 4. (B) EP as Necessary but *Not* Sufficient for MP

EP concerns judgments, while MP concerns actions. The widely acknowledged phenomenon of *akrasia* exemplifies the fact that action does not automatically issue from moral judgments, which softens the claim that MP entirely depends on EP in the form of accurate moral judgments. If one approaches an institutional setting with one's solid moral principles in mind but then does not deliberate accordingly, the problem need not be framed in terms of lack of cognitive control over morally irrelevant situational factors, but, rather, as a lack of moti-

vation to act on one's solid moral principles. To be clear, something akin to "I know that I should not eat the second slice of cake", yet I eat it; "I know I should not support a discriminatory policy", yet I do it.<sup>11</sup> According to this picture, people *can* form accurate moral judgments, at least at the abstract level; the problem is that something happens between forming accurate moral judgments and acting on them. This something can amount to being distracted by situational factors; but this, in turn, speaks to the fact that those accurate moral judgments were not so motivating in the first place. MP may just amount to whatever it is that, along with accurate moral knowledge, bridges the knowledge-action gap.

Now, *akrasia* flags the intertwining between cognitive and affective states when it comes to issuing moral action. As noted by Kriegel (2012),<sup>12</sup> that of "moral judgments" is an ambiguous term (482): crucially, it generally implies both moral beliefs and what Gendler (2008) has labeled "moral aliefs", and the two mental states cannot be subsumed under the same label. According to his picture, what explains the knowledge-action gap is the discrepancy between moral beliefs and aliefs (2012: 477), where moral aliefs are mental states that belong to the "low-road system" (2012: 476), which is that of fast, automatic, unconscious, inflexible and tied to action processes; while moral beliefs belong to the "high-road system" (*ibid.*) which is slow, flexible, consciously manageable and indirectly linked to action. In the strong-willed person, aliefs and beliefs harmonize, while in the weak-willed person,<sup>13</sup> they do not; this is why the strong-willed person is the one who acts on her moral beliefs, while the weak-willed person does not.

Kriegel (2012) stresses the moral relevance of aliefs when it comes to their constitutive motivational role (2012: 481), their action-guidance, and the fact that they are object of moral evaluations (2012: 483). If an agent expresses the moral belief that racism is wrong, but does not act accordingly due to aliefs of the kind "black person, danger!",<sup>14</sup> then we judge that person on the basis of the content of her aliefs rather than that of her beliefs. It is, nonetheless, possible to educate moral aliefs so that they harmonize with moral beliefs (2012: 484).

This seems to suggest that in order to defend the possibility of MP, one would need to support the possibility to align moral aliefs with moral beliefs. This is the "something else" that is needed in order for MP to come about. One can pursue the beliefs-aliefs route, but there are also other options.

<sup>11</sup> Klenk and Sauer acknowledge this: "improved beliefs and improved conduct are both part of moral progress, but only the realization of *both* amounts to full moral progress. [...] Since the control requirement matters for the possibility of improving people's moral beliefs, the control requirement ends up mattering for moral progress" (2021: 943). The point is that the problem may just be a false problem: people are, generally, perfectly able to form correct moral beliefs. The obstacle to full moral progress is not epistemic, but motivational.

<sup>12</sup> See Kaplan 2016 for an account of moral motivation as a dynamic multi-component (identity, emotions and cognition).

<sup>13</sup> I am aware that "weak-willed" does not exhaustively translate "*akratic*"; here I treat them interchangeably, since their distinction falls outside of the scope of this work and, thus, does not undermine the overall argument of the paper.

<sup>14</sup> Aliefs have both a cognitive and an affective component, but the two need not coincide (Kriegel 2012: 480).



To name a couple, according to Frankfurt (1971) the weak-willed only has second-order desires (“I want to be fair”), while bridging the knowledge-action gap amounts to developing second-order volitions (“I want *to want* to be fair”). According to Blasi (1984, 1999) the weak-willed is one who forms moral judgments based on commitments that are merely peripheral to her moral self-identity, while motivation to act on moral judgments comes from commitments that are core to her moral self-identity.<sup>15</sup> In short, MP comes about when we can form accurate moral judgments at the abstract level, EP, *and* we are motivated to act on them to the point that we are not misled by situational factors. In this sense, EP is necessary but not sufficient for MP.

Now, proponents of the Cognitive Control challenge would probably question the fact that we can be motivated to act on moral judgments to the point that we are not misled by situational factors. A discussion in this direction takes the shape of a match between arguments *for* the possibility to be fully motivated by abstract moral judgments, and arguments *against* this possibility. Arguing for the possibility to be fully motivated by abstract moral judgments can be a promising route to pursue, if it is indeed the case that EP in the form of accurate moral judgments is necessary, but not sufficient for MP. If there is such a possibility, then full MP is also possible.

The Cognitive Control challenge, however, raises an interesting point: we may need to abandon the epistemic requirement tout court, rather than arguing that full control of some sort is still possible. This solution calls for ways to bring MP about that do not rely on our faulty psychology, such as the one advocated by Sauer (2023) in his latest book, which is the solution of institutional bypassing.<sup>16</sup> This solution takes the burden of progress away from individual’s shoulders and back to institutions. Although I am sympathetic with this solution, I will spend the rest of the paper examining another possible way to frame the possibility of MP that neither relies on EP in the form of accurate moral judgments, nor takes it completely away from the individual.

### 5. (C) EP as Neither Necessary Nor Sufficient for MP

When it comes to current accounts of moral progress, the assumption is that one first, say, gains better *understanding* of the situation, and only *then* is one in the position to morally progress according to one’s new, more accurate understanding. This is because better understanding of the situation allows one to form more accurate moral judgments, at least theoretically. According to Iris Murdoch, the process goes in the opposite direction: one first enters a better moral position, and only then can one gain better understanding of the situation.<sup>17</sup> Thus, a way to make sense of (C) that allows to re-frame the debate is:

(C') it is MP that is both necessary and sufficient for EP.

<sup>15</sup> See also Vigani 2016 and Lapsley 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Supported by “cultural evolution and cumulative moral learning”: see in particular Sauer 2023: Chapter 7.

<sup>17</sup> We need not think of this in temporal order: the automaticity of the process makes it so that moral progress enables epistemic progress, but, when moral progress comes about, then the two coincide.

Now, a comprehensive exposition of Murdoch's theory of MP is outside of the scope of this paper. In what follows, I will consider her account of MP as loving attention, her account of EP as access to moral reality, and evaluate (C') in light of our discussion on the Cognitive Control challenge. There is extensive literature both on Murdoch's idea of moral progress<sup>18</sup> and on her Platonic view regarding gaining closeness to the truth.<sup>19</sup> To be concise, Murdochian MP amounts to paying the right kind of attention to what surrounds us, where "the right kind" of attention is a "just and loving gaze" (IP: 327) oriented towards an other's reality. It is "just and loving" in so far as I am entirely focused on the object of my attention, as opposed to myself, in a way that allows the object to reveal itself exactly as it is, and not depending on what *I* take it to be. This is how EP comes about: when agents allow reality to *reveal* itself, they gain epistemic access to what is true about it. That is, they manage to see it in a realistic way (Rosenhagen 2019). Murdoch also calls this "un-selfing", since what it is that the agent does by paying just and loving attention is to de-center herself, to look away from herself. What prevents us from un-selfing is the constant interference of our ego, which loudly calls for our attention like a toddler crying for her baby bottle. Those moments in which one manages to hear something other than the ego's relentless cry, are moments of access to moral reality. Thus, what prevents MP is not our inability to ignore situational factors, but our natural propensity towards being self-centered. The *only* way to achieve closeness to the truth is through paying loving attention to the world. When this is done right, reality reveals itself: this is the moral progress, MP, that enables epistemic progress, EP.

The reason why morally irrelevant situational factors such as moods and presences of levers are so impactful on people's deliberations is due to our natural in-attention to moral reality. The solution, however, does not lie in a battle to control our epistemic shortcomings; rather, it lies in the activity of *silencing* the interference of the ego when attending to a particular situation. This still sounds just like another way of framing the Cognitive Control challenge, without any chance of dismissing the control requirement. In other words, it seems that even if (C') is true, cognitive control is still required for MP and, consequently, for EP. After all, in order to actually see an other's reality, I need to be able to control what it is that may impact my vision, like irrelevant situational factors. Let us unpack this.

Call the gaze of someone who is trying to manage one's epistemic lack of control over situational factors an effort of "un-biasing;"<sup>20</sup> call Murdochian attention an act of "un-selfing." According to Murdoch, what is required of us is not *un-biasing*, but *un-selfing*. The difference is subtle but crucial, and it has to do with the form of the truth one gains closeness to. "Un-biasing" has the pretence to grant a neutral, detached moral outlook; a sort of view from "nowhere".<sup>21</sup> "Un-selfing", on the other hand, does not aim at a neutral, detached moral out-

<sup>18</sup> For Murdochian MP as successful moral perception, see Clifton 2013, Panizza 2019, Mylonaki 2019, Ratajczyk 2023). Murdochian moral progress is not reduced to moral actions, but it is first and foremost a process of "unselfing" (Panizza 2022).

<sup>19</sup> See for example EP as access to the Good; Setiya 2013, Antonaccio 2012: Chapter 4, Panizza 2022: Chapter 2.

<sup>20</sup> Where "bias" is understood broadly as anything that may distort one's judgment.

<sup>21</sup> A sort of Archimedean view (see Rawls 1971, Nagel 1986), where the agent is so distant from the world that she can finally see it objectively and impartially.

look. Rather, it aims at a rich, contentful moral outlook, and one that is “better” than the former to the extent it is less ego-driven,<sup>22</sup> not to the extent it is more neutral.<sup>23</sup> In order to appreciate the difference between un-biasing and un-selfing, we need to give a lengthy look at Murdoch’s M&D example:

A mother, [...] M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, [...] D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D’s accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him. [...] However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: ‘I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.’ Here I assume that M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters. If we take D to be now absent or dead this can make it clear that the change is not in D’s behaviour but in M’s mind. D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on. And as I say, *ex hypothesi*, M’s outward behaviour, beautiful from the start, in no way alters (IP: 329).

What is it that M actually *does*? In a recent reading of Murdochian MP Severini (2021) claims that M “understands” D. She “thinks” about her, she “introspects”, she looks inwards and then, finally, realizes that she has misinterpreted her whole personality.<sup>24</sup> In other words, M un-biasing and then discovers that reality is different; so far, this reading is compatible with the understanding of EP in the form of accurate, *neutral*, truth-tracking moral judgments, since M seems to be doing just that: controlling whatever it is that is both situational and obstructive to accurate moral knowledge, with the aim of gaining an evidence-based view of who D is and of their relational dynamics. However, we have reasons to doubt that the story ends here.<sup>25</sup> According to the *un-biasing* reading, M first introspects and sees that she is a biased person (old-fashioned, snobbish); thus, she realizes that she has looked at D through irrelevant factors such as her own jealousy, or a particularly high-pitch tone of M’s voice. Then, she looks at D again and reinterprets her personality according to her now un-biased gaze. According to the *un-selfing* reading, on the other hand, M *stops* looking at herself. She does not search for a neutral, Archimedean view on D; she lets D reveal herself. If M were merely to un-bias, she would still be enforcing a gaze on M: one that has the pretence to be neutral. On the other hand, in un-selfing, by paying attention to D (MP), M lets D’s reality reveal itself (EP) and only then is she in the position to appreciate her own biases and, possibly, do something about

<sup>22</sup> “The direction of attention is outward, away from the self” (MGM: 66).

<sup>23</sup> “Un-selfing” can be exhaustively understood as paying attention without being “self-concerned”, see Panizza 2022: Chapter 2. On “un-selfing” as a form of *askesis*—philosophical exercise—see Antonaccio 2012.

<sup>24</sup> A reading that seems supported by Murdoch’s description of the case (“Here I assume that M observes D or at least *reflects deliberately* about D, until gradually her vision of D alters”, my italics).

<sup>25</sup> Severini (2021) herself does not contend that hers is a purely Murdochian reading.

them. I will now consider three distinctions we can draw between un-biasing and un-selfing.<sup>26</sup>

The first distinction we can draw is that un-selfing amounts to a gradual, irreversible discovery of D's reality, while un-biasing seems to be a reversible switch of perspective: one could employ a neutral outlook or a biased outlook, but, according to Murdoch, if one truly sees reality as it is, one cannot "switch back" to ignoring it. What allows the reversibility of un-biasing is the mediation of the ego: *I can see this neutrally, I can see this snobbishly*, etc. But if the ego does not mediate, I do not have control over *how* I see what I see. It is in this sense that un-selfing is a discovery, and not a simple change of perspective I can decide to entertain. This leads to the second distinction: successful un-selfing reveals reality as it is independently from us, while successful un-biasing reveals a picture of reality that still depends on how we believe reality should look like. As Murdoch did not believe in the possibility of a view from nowhere, a picture of reality that is expected to be "neutral" in this sense is, actually, still very much dependent on our assumptions about how this neutrality should look like. Therefore, un-biasing cannot amount to MP. Finally, a third distinction is that it is un-selfing that precedes—and facilitates—un-biasing, and not the other way round. To put it differently, un-biasing may still take place; but if it does, it is not a necessary condition for MP. It is, rather, a consequence of MP, since one first sees reality, and only then is one in the position to form accurate judgments. In short, the subtle but crucial difference is that un-biasing can be possible through an exercise of cognitive control, while un-selfing is possible only through letting go of control;<sup>27</sup> that is, only by abandoning my pretences to see accurately, can I truly see accurately.<sup>28</sup>

Moral progress, then, is possible to the extent to which refraining from imposing our ego-centered gaze on reality is possible. Refraining from doing so allows us to get closer to the truth, since it allows reality to reveal itself *independently* of our ego-centric perspectives which, in turn, does not imply neutrality. According to this picture, lack of cognitive control is perfectly compatible with the possibility of un-selfing: we can get closer to the truth even if we cannot fully control our cognitive shortcomings, since gaining closeness to the truth does not require forming "clear" judgments but, rather, requires an initial refraining from judging; that is, it requires refraining from imposing even the best interpretations we can offer, in order to pay attention to what is there independently of us. According to this picture, what is required for MP is not a cognitive battle but, rather, cognitive *silence*.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper I have considered three possible logical relations between EP and MP:

<sup>26</sup> I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting to frame this point around these three distinctions.

<sup>27</sup> See Olsson's interpretation of Murdoch's un-selfing as "a moment of letting go" (2018).

<sup>28</sup> Love is "the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real" Murdoch (S&G: 28). For an overview on Murdochian love as just attention, see Rosenhagen 2023. See Bagnoli 2018 on Murdoch's love as an independent source of moral authority and Rosenhagen 2019 on a parallel between Murdoch's love and Aristotle's *philia*.

- (A) EP is both necessary and sufficient for MP
- (B) EP is necessary but not sufficient for MP
- (C) EP is neither necessary nor sufficient for MP.

If we assume (A), then we cannot account for full EP nor, consequently, for full MP. If we assume (B), we need something that would grant MP that is not cognitive control. I argued that this something else is likely to be the motivational element that is proper of theories of moral psychology that account for ways to bridge the knowledge-action gap. Both (A) and (B) are ways to “soften” the cognitive control challenge without dismissing it. If we assume (C), I suggested that a promising route is that of exploring the possibility of (C’):

(C’) it is MP that is both necessary and sufficient for EP.

I then argued that an interesting way to make sense of (C’) is through Murdochian-like MP in the form of un-selfing. The appeal of this move lies in the fact that, to support this possibility, we need to conceive of “epistemic” and “moral” progress in different terms. According to a Murdochian reading moral progress is possible to the extent to which it is possible to un-self (as opposed to un-bias), and we do not need cognitive control to do that.

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