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Iris Murdoch, Philosopher Meets Novelist

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Abstract: The life and the philosophy of D. H. Lawrence influenced his novels. The emotional turmoil of his life, his obsession with perfecting human relationships, and his fascination with the duality of the world led him to create his most experimental and pivotal novel, The Plumed Serpent. In The Plumed Serpent Lawrence uses a superstructure of myth to convey his belief in the necessity for the rebirth of a religion based on the dark gods of antiquity; coupled with this was his fervent belief that in all matters, sexual or spiritual, physical or emotional, political or religious, men should lead and women should follow. Through a study of Lawrence's life and personal creed, an examination of the mythic structure of The Plumed Serpent, and a brief forward look to Lady Chatterly's Lover, it is possible to see The Plumed Serpent as significant in the Lawrencian canon. Though didactic and obscure at times, the novel is an important transitional work.
[Rajput, B. and Kumar, A. **Iris Murdoch, Philosopher Meets Novelist**. *Researcher* 2023;15(5):7-12]. ISSN 1553-9865 (print); ISSN 2163-8950 (online). http://www.sciencepub.net/researcher. 02.doi:10.7537/marsrsj150523.02.

Keywords: Iris Murdoch, Novels, Philospher.

Introduction:

Murdoch's family was middle class (her father was a civil servant) and Irish Protestant (an identity that remained important to Murdoch throughout her life). They moved to London from Ireland when Murdoch was very young. Murdoch attended Oxford University, overlapping with three other women—Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Mary Midgley—at a time (1938–1942) when many male students were away at war. Foot, Murdoch, and Midgley all became prominent and influential moral philosophers, and Anscombe a prominent philosopher of action and a student, friend, translator and interpreter of Wittgenstein.

The four (now being referred to as the "Wartime Quartet" [MacCumhaill & Wiseman 2022; Lipscomb 2021]) stayed in touch after the war, and Murdoch did so with each of them individually. All four pushed back against various aspects of the male-dominated Oxford orthodoxy of linguistic and analytic philosophy (e.g., the fact/value dichotomy, the severing of ethics from an understanding of human nature, the neglect of virtue and vice), though their own philosophies differed significantly from one another.

Over her lifetime Murdoch developed an entirely distinctive position in moral philosophy, as well as philosophy of art and religion (both of which she saw as important for morality). She was engaged with the Anglo-American moral philosophy of that period and its historical antecedents (such as Hobbes and Hume) but was equally engaged throughout her life with traditional and some then-current "Continental" philosophy—especially Schopenhauer, Hegel, Heidegger (on whom she wrote a book, to be published in the near future), Sartre, Adorno, Buber, and Derrida; with Christian thinkers St. Paul, St. Augustine, Anselm, Eckhart, Julian of Norwich; and with Hindu and especially Buddhist thought. Her views were also strongly influenced by Plato, Kant, Simone Weil, and Wittgenstein, and she declared herself in 1968 to be "a kind of Platonist" (Rose 1968).

Murdoch's Trajectory and Reception

Murdoch taught at Oxford from 1948–1963 (as both tutor and lecturer), and was highly regarded by colleagues, often appearing in collections and BBC programs with leading British philosophers generally though not always in the analytic or linguistic tradition. She was comfortable with the analytic approach, though her thinking was clearly headed in different directions, in part because of the influence of Simone Weil (Broackes 2012a: 19–20).

However, unusual for Oxford philosophers of that period, she was also drawn to Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, to which she had been exposed while working after the war in Belgium (and Austria) for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). Her first book, in 1953, was *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*. She was instrumental in bringing French thinkers of that

period, including also Simone de Beauvoir, the feminist/existentialist, and Albert Camus, to an English-speaking audience.

Murdoch left her position at Oxford in 1963 (though she continued to live in Oxford for some of each week) and increasingly lost touch with British academic philosophy. As of this writing, Murdoch is best known for a collection of three essays written in the 1960s, none originally published in easily accessible philosophy venues, published in 1970 as *The Sovereignty of Good*. This collection is by far the main source for professional philosophers writing on Murdoch, and of Murdoch's broader impact on moral philosophy, and this entry will draw largely but not exclusively on that work.

Toward the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s, some Anglo-American philosophers began to make use of Murdoch in criticizing moral philosophy of the day, or in developing a distinctive position of their own. This included Charles Taylor, Hilary Putnam, Cora Diamond, Genevieve Lloyd, John McDowell, Raimond Gaita, Martha Nussbaum, Lawrence Blum and Sabina Lovibond. This early secondary literature did not involve deep scholarly engagement with Murdoch's own work, but was inspired by it and helped bring Murdoch to the attention of the wider professional philosophical world.

A collection of almost all Murdoch's previous articles (including those in *Sovereignty*) plus a short book on Plato was published in 1997, as *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by her friend and biographer, the literary scholar Peter Conradi. That and the first scholarly collection on her work, *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (Antonaccio & Schweiker 1996), with essays by theologians and philosophers (including Diamond, Nussbaum, and Taylor) prompted an increase in scholarship directly on Murdoch in the 2000s. Justin Broackes's *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, in 2012, was the first all-philosopher collection on Murdoch. While the recent scholarship sometimes aims at demonstrating Murdoch's relevance to current live issues in Anglo-American ethics (Setiya 2013; Hopwood 2018), increasingly, scholarship (including the two articles just cited) engages with Murdoch's own philosophical preoccupations on her terms.

In 1992, Murdoch published her sole book working out her own philosophical views (*Sovereignty* being a collection of separately published essays), *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Murdoch's views, especially in the latter work, have been difficult for contemporary philosophers to place comfortably within the intellectual terrain of moral philosophy as it has developed in our time, in part because of her unusual range of intellectual touchstones; in part because, especially in *Metaphysics*, she seldom writes in a standard "argument/conclusion" format; and in part because of her intellectual distance from contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. There is currently very little secondary literature on *Metaphysics*, but Dooley and Hämäläinen's 2019 collection, *Reading Iris Murdoch's Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* will hopefully spur further scholarship on that work. A Routledge Handbook, Hopwood and Panizza's *The Murdochian Mind* (forthcoming), will contribute substantially to Murdoch scholarship.

Murdoch is distinctive as a philosopher in another way as well. Beginning in 1954, she became a published novelist, with twenty-six novels in her lifetime, several of which won or were short-listed for important British literary prizes. Although her philosophy and her novels can be read entirely separately from one another, they are plausibly regarded as connected and mutually illuminating, although in interviews Murdoch sometimes denied this. A good deal of scholarly literature (mostly from literary scholars [but from the philosophy side, see Nussbaum 1990; Browning 2018b]) is devoted to exploring their connection and non-connection. Murdoch is the subject of an award-winning biography, *Iris: The Life of Iris Murdoch*, by Peter Conradi (2001), and an award-winning film of that same year, *Iris* (dir: Richard Eyre), based on a memoir by Murdoch's husband, John Bayley, which focuses largely on her decline into Alzheimer's in her last years (Bayley 1999). The Iris Murdoch Society publishes (since 2008) a twice-yearly journal, the *Iris Murdoch Review* (see Other Internet Resources), that had been almost entirely a venue for scholarship and commentary on Murdoch's literary oeuvre, but recently has started to carry much more philosophy.

Sartre, Existentialism and the Novel

Murdoch's book on the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953), was the first study of Sartre's philosophy in English, and a landmark publication. It remains a valuable resource.

She is at once sympathetic to and critical of Sartre. She had been reading his work closely over preceding years, and discusses him at length in her journals and letters, notably in her correspondence with the French experimental novelist Raymond Queneau. On the one hand she is attracted to Sartre.

Unlike those dreaming along the spires of Oxford, he does philosophy with a kick to it. She observes how Sartre stays close to lived experience, and in doing so shows a novelist's sensibility. She's impressed by his revealing review of states of consciousness in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), but is critical of his narrow focus on the self and his tendency to ignore the impact of philosophy on the social and political world. In essays of the 1950s, Murdoch is also critical of existentialist novels, which are not very open to the interplay of characters and follow too closely the trajectory of a single guiding mind. She herself published her first novel, *Under the Net*, in 1954, and would publish a further twenty five novels at regular intervals over the ensuing forty five years. The main protagonist in *Under the Net*, Jake Donoghue, bears a resemblance to an existentialist hero, but his egoistic flaws highlight the shortcomings of an existentialist perspective.

In essays throughout the 1950s and 60s, Murdoch reflected upon the roles of art, morals, and politics in the wider economy of experience. In 'A House of Theory' (1958), she observed the post-war decline in ideology, and, given the more general obsolescence of social and religious intellectual commitment, she urged that socialism still be promoted by a review of possible utopian futures. In 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' (1959) she reframed Kant's idea of the sublime to capture how the intricacies of characters interacting with one another can yield a sublime expression of lived experience. Her most famous essay on literature is 'Against Dryness' (1961), in which she critiqued novels that either provide journalistic accounts of conventions or are merely fictional representations of their authors' viewpoints. She reimagined the novel as allowing for the development of free characters. (These essays are all available in *Existentialists and Mystics*, edited by Murdoch, 1997.)

The Sovereignty of Good

In the 1950s and 1960s Murdoch also continued working on moral philosophy, alongside publishing essays on thought, language, and the self. Her horizon was broadened by lecturing at the Royal College of Art in London from 1963-1967.

In 1970 *The Sovereignty of Good* brought together three of her essays on moral philosophy, 'The Idea of Perfection'; 'On "God" and "Good"'; and 'The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts'. The book sets her work apart from that of other contemporary Continental and Anglo-American thinkers. She opposes what she takes to be shallow behaviourist accounts of the self, while also opposing theories of ethics from Kant to Sartre which privilege the role of choice exercised by autonomous individuals, but do not take care to integrate or even examine social situations and the perspectives of others.

Rather than assuming a neutral state of affairs to which morality is to be added, Murdoch reminds us of the myriad of ways in which we perceive and value our experiences, and hence derive our morality. Morality depends upon the values that lie, perhaps hidden, in our detailed understanding of things, rather than in theories and values we simply develop in our heads and bring to what's going on in our lives.

For Murdoch most of the significant work in each person's moral thinking is done by the way we imagine and describe the lives in which we are involved. In the essay 'The Idea of Perfection' she gives the famous example of a mother who takes against her daughter-in-law. The girl appears brusque and without refinement, and hence unsuitable for her beloved son. But instead of fixing upon this judgment, Murdoch imagines the mother lovingly revisiting her conception of her daughter-in-law in an effort to see her more justly. Instead of taking the daughter-in- law to be vulgar, she sees her as refreshingly simple; not undignified, but spontaneous. So Murdoch imagines the mother as capable of understanding her daughter-in-law differently from her immediate impression. This capacity to rethink and to move away from our prejudices is central in Murdoch's consideration of the moral significance of paying attention to other people and situations.

Most notably within her essay 'On "God" and "Good"', Murdoch maintains that morality might be seen in terms of realising *the Good* – a transcendent standard of perfection in the style of Plato. Murdoch believes that in the modern world old ideas connected with a personal and supernatural God can no longer be sustained; but she imagines that a notion of the Good could still provide a paradigm of morality that might encourage people to look away from mere moral subjectivism to the possibility of objective goodness.

Murdoch in Her Times

As is generally recognized, the English philosophical tradition has a strong empiricist and anti-metaphysical bent. An important exception was the late 19th and early 20th century movement of a Hegelian-influenced "absolute idealism", whose most prominent exponent was F.H. Bradley (1846–1924).

This movement was seen as discredited by two prominent early 20th century British philosophers, G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell. The final blow was dealt by A.J. Ayer "logical positivist" work, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, channeling for an English audience views developed by the Vienna Circle in the 1920s and 30s. Logical positivism essentially declared that what made a statement meaningful was the possibility of verifying it through empirical observation. Science was seen as the paradigm, though not the only, form of meaningful discourse. Metaphysical statements typical of British Idealism, such as that "all reality is one" or that "time is unreal", were viewed as meaningless because unverifiable. Ethical and evaluative statements, such as that killing is wrong, were taken to have no cognitive significance. Murdoch thus came of age when the metaphysical tradition was still within memory (she read Bradley seriously and taught him), even if regarded as discredited. For her entire career, she retained a strong sense of the value of metaphysics both in itself and as providing broader visions and structures for moral philosophical reflection, while also appreciating the force of especially a Wittgensteinian critique of traditional metaphysics. Her main tutor at Oxford, Donald MacKinnon, with whom she remained close through much of her younger life, was a philosophical theologian, and helped influence her in a less positivistic direction, also less distant from and hostile to religion (MacKinnon 1957).

Soon verificationism and its related ethical view, "emotivism" (ethical statements express emotions, especially of approval and disapproval) was abandoned and a more sophisticated, and (in Oxford) a much more influential view of ethical language was developed by R.M. Hare, in his 1952 *The Language of Morals*. Hare said that moral statements did not aim to make truthful assertions, but had a distinct character as prescriptions, telling their addressees to do what is stated in the prescription. Hare's view, "universal prescriptivism", said that a prescription no matter what its content was moral if the subject prescribed it for all (or everyone relevantly similarly situated), and in that sense universally.

Hare's account of ethics involved several assumptions, not always articulated, but widely shared in the practice of moral philosophy in the 1950s (and many of them beyond). Murdoch's rejection of all of them provides an essential backdrop to her distinctive approach to ethics.

1. Fact/value dichotomy: A fact can never entail a value. If a term appears to be simultaneously factual and evaluative (e.g., "rude", to take an example made famous by Murdoch's dear friend Philippa Foot), it is really a conjunction of a descriptive/factual meaning and an evaluation conferred on the factual referent by the speaker. This view is inherited from the empiricist tradition "created in the scientific image" (SG 1970: 28/321[1]). Murdoch says it is "the most important argument in modern moral philosophy" (M&E 1957/EM: 64).
2. Moral agents all inhabit the same shared world of facts (M&E 1957/EM: 71).
3. Values are not part of the world, capable of being discovered by individual agents, but are brought to or projected onto the world by moral agents. Quite often, situations present no moral issues for the agent at all.
4. The fundamental subject matter of ethics is what acts persons should perform, and principles and procedures for determining those acts, not what kind of person it is good to be (e.g., what sort of qualities of character, or virtues, it is good to have), or how to describe the human world, an enterprise Murdoch takes to be inherently ethical.
5. "The individual's 'stream of consciousness' is of comparatively little importance, partly because it is often not there at all, and more pertinently because it is and can only be through overt acts that we can characterize another person mentally or morally" (VCM 1956/EM 77). Inner reflection is of moral interest only as it issues in choice, decision and action.
6. Metaphysics has no legitimate role to play in ethics, and is not an intellectually coherent project.
7. The role of the moral philosopher is distinct from that of the moralist, who aims to "elaborate a moral code or encourage its observance", as Ayer says (Warnock 1960: 131). The task of the moral philosopher is to analyze the character of moral statements, a linguistic/analytic rather than moral enterprise. The moral philosopher qua philosopher should remain neutral on specific moral issues or more generally on questions about how to act and live.

Murdoch's rejection of all these views in her writings of the 1950s and 60s is partly connected with her take on existentialism. Existentialism attracted

Murdoch partly because it was a philosophy one could "inhabit" or "live by" [OGG: 47/337]. For existentialism it mattered tremendously what one did, in particular situations as well as with one's life overall, and how philosophy was to guide and illuminate that journey. That sense of urgency is lacking in British philosophical ethics in its turn toward characterizing "the language of morals", partly because this enterprise was seen as morally neutral, not having implications for conduct. (Murdoch's friend Foot, who herself famously challenged the idea that the language of morals was morally neutral, poignantly captured Murdoch's relation to the linguistic turn in ethics: "We were interested in moral language, she was interested in the moral life…She left us, in the end" [Conradi 2001: 302].)

Murdoch's View of the Self Against the Existentialist/Behaviorist Account

Murdoch developed her own view of morality in reaction against both Hare and (notwithstanding her admiration for it) Sartrean existentialism as she understood it. (For a critique of her take on existentialism, see Moran 2012.) Both viewed freedom as fundamental to the moral enterprise. For Hare the moral agent is free to choose their moral values, constrained only by the requirement that the agent prescribe those values universally. Sartre shares the former view but eschews the universalist "logic of morality" constraint.[2] For Sartre, anguish (Angst) attends our recognition that our choices are totally up to us; Hare's view lacks that existential anguish. But what interests Murdoch is their shared privileging of the choosing will in the moral enterprise, the central image of the moral agent as responsible and free (and, in Hare's case, rational), and their rejection of a structure of objective value outside the individual that gives authoritative direction for deciding and choosing. Murdoch sees the appeal of this view, in both its existentialist and analytic forms, but finds it false to our moral experience and to the nature of moral agency.

In the 1962 "The Idea of Perfection" (in *Sovereignty*), Murdoch begins to develop a contrasting picture of the self, moral agency, and moral reality, building on her 1956 "Vision and Choice in Morality". Her stated target is not Hare, who is only briefly mentioned, but Stuart Hampshire, whom she admired as a subtler and deeper thinker (and to whom she dedicated *Sovereignty*) and whom she regarded, in his 1959 *Thought and Action*, as having articulated and defended much more explicitly than Hare the view of human agency and the self underlying Hare's moral theory (largely but not entirely incorporating the seven characteristics of Hare's philosophy mentioned above). Murdoch says that the will does not engage in choice out of nowhere, but out of a rich and complex individual psyche formed by ongoing attitudes, perceptions, drives, attachments, beliefs, and modes of attention. This substantial self is in the process of formation, change, and development all the time; and it provides the context for choice in determinate situations (against point 4 above). Murdoch notes that sometimes our way of apprehending a particular situation will seem to make so evident to us what we should do that processes of deliberation standardly underlying choice will not be necessary and we will simply perform the action. We should not, she thinks, value a kind of "freedom" that would exert will contrary to an accurate perception of moral features of the situation that bear on conduct.

Murdoch says that philosophy should develop a moral or philosophical psychology that provides the terms in which to understand and characterize the substantial self to which she gives center stage, displacing the existentialist/analytic (which she sometimes calls "existentialist-behavioristic") freely choosing will. This call for a new turn in philosophical ethics toward what came to be called "moral psychology" helped to usher in that subject. It somewhat echoed Murdoch's friend Elizabeth Anscombe's similar but more radical and striking charge in her 1958 "Modern Moral Philosophy" to put the subject of ethics on hold until a philosophical psychology that clarified the notions of intention, will, desire, and belief could be developed. But Anscombe thought of philosophical psychology as an enterprise independent of and prior to doing ethics (Anscombe 1958 [1997: 38]). By contrast Murdoch did not think such a philosophical psychology (a term she also sometimes used but more frequently used "moral psychology") could be separated from ethics (OGG: 46/337; Diamond 2010; Brewer 2009: 8–9).

Murdoch takes some steps toward developing such a moral psychology by embracing Freud as the great theorist of the human mind, who sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control. (OGG: 51/341)

This substantial self constrains the will much more extensively than the existentialist/analytic picture recognizes. "The area of [the moral agent's] vaunted freedom of choice is not usually very great" (SGC: 78/364). We cannot easily rid ourselves of pernicious emotions, attachments and motives that

work against moral motivation and behavior. Murdoch adds,

Introspection reveals only the deep tissue of ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings. (OGG: 51/241)

She sees the Freudian view as "a realistic and detailed picture of the fallen man" (OGG: 51/241), one of many places where her philosophy is influenced by a Christian worldview, as she fully recognizes. This pessimistic view of the human psyche plays a central role in Murdoch's thought for her entire life, bolstered by her encounter with Schopenhauer and her particular take on Kant, both of whom articulate a philosophic dualism with a strong egoistic anti-moral force countered by a moral force (differing among those two philosophers) in the psyche.

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3/12/2023