Chapter 7

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Murdoch and the End of Ideology

Introduction

Is Murdoch apolitical? Murdoch's thought tends to be reviewed without reference to her conception of politics. Her novels are read as exploring a range of personal emotions rather than public issues. Dooley maintains, 'She (Murdoch) was fairly constant in her belief that the novel was not the place for expression of political or political comment…' (Dooley, 2003, p. xix). Commentaries on her life limit themselves to passing reference to her early commitment to communism, but otherwise ignore her politics. Standard readings of her life either focus upon its abject end or concentrate on her personal relationships. It is true that Murdoch did not see herself as a political novelist (See Browning, 2013), and Murdoch's life and work show her to be highly attuned to issues of personal morality and personal relationships. She takes friendship and love seriously. Yet she is a holistic thinker, whose metaphysics is inclusive in incorporating religion and sensuality, the search for goodness and the reality of evil and political as well as personal morality (See Browning, 2018). In fact, Murdoch's novels engage with multiple aspects of experience, including reading of the political contexts and responsibilities of their characters. Indeed her philosophy and her novels reflect the particular political atmosphere of life in the West after the Second World War.

Murdoch's politics reflect her changing estimation of the character and role of ideology in Western politics in the second half of the twentieth century. In the early twentieth century, the grand ideologies of communism and fascism imposed themselves on European and world politics. In particular, their utopian visions

dominated political debate in the lead up to the Second World War and the fate of Europe and the world was entwined with the fate of nations that espoused their causes. In the aftermath of the Second World War, there was decline in ideological politics that was captured by Bell's sociological observation of its demise (Bell, 1962). Yet its obituary coincided with signs of its revival. The New Left of the 1960s and the subsequent rise of the New Right put paid to the idea of the death of ideology. Yet the triumph of the West in the Cold War and the apparent eclipse of communism and fascism inspired Fukuyama to declare the end of history, and with it, the end of ideology (Fukuyama, 1989). Fukuyama took capitalism and liberal democracy to constitute the effective answers to historical questions of political and social organisation (Fukuyama, 1992) A few years earlier Leotard had heralded the arrival of postmodernism and the end of grand narratives, which implied a farewell to grand ideological claims (See Lyotard 1984 and Browning 2000). In the aftermath of the Second World War Murdoch, like Bell and other political sociologists and political scientists, recognised how the intensity of ideological commitment had declined but she herself continued to espouse ideological causes. Subsequently, she shared with Fukuyama a sense that communism was damaged fatally by its failures in Eastern Europe and the Far East, and while she never declared herself a postmodernist, her thinking reflects Lyotard's diagnosis of the problems besetting grand narratives. What distinguishes her from Lyotard, Fukuyama and Bell in the immediate post-war context is that she neither declares the end of ideology, nor favours an unideological world. The framing and contesting of ideas by which we are to order our lives is central to Murdoch's reading of the world, and more specifically of the political world. Even if she is critical of an ideological pursuit of political perfection that jeopardises the safety of individuals, she values political debate at the broadest level.

Liberal culture and Morality after the Second World War

Murdoch was far from being apolitical during the Second World War. She embraced communism and passed secrets on to the Russians, and she was determined to help to make the world anew in its aftermath. This existential commitment embraced making the most of personal relationships that had been threatened by war but also required political action to restructure society (Murdoch, 1942). By the end of the war Murdoch was no longer a member of the Communist Party, but she remained a committed socialist. She was enthused by the Beveridge Report and delighted at the Labour Victory in 1945. In the post-war world of the 1950s Murdoch took note of the post-war evolution of political theory and practice. The 'ends' of the grand ideological schemes of communism and fascism had receded before the buoyant consumerism of Western capitalism. In the UK the burgeoning supply of consumer goods, and the development of a bureaucratic welfare state catering for basic needs combined to dilute working class radicalism. The materialist and scientific temper of the times also militated against speculative forms of knowledge and cast doubt on the claims of radical ideologies. The hegemony of liberalism in the post-war world contrasted with the conflicted ideological scene of the inter-war years. Murdoch reflected upon these developments. She highlighted the shallowness of the contemporary post-war culture, observing the narrowness of its artistic expression and the restrictions of the prevailing forms of liberal morality. The contemporary novel and dominant moral ideas extolled individual choice at the expense of a broader vision of things and a recognition of the relationality of the social world. In the 1950s Murdoch continued to espouse the cause of socialism, though she took account of the contemporary conditions in reflecting upon how best to prosecute the cause in unpromising circumstances.

In the 1950s, in a series of writings on art and existentialism Murdoch diagnosed the condition of her age, critiquing its narrow focus upon an individual's will and its anti-metaphysical temper. For Murdoch, cultural and moral possibilities were reduced to choosing, while the quality of thought and the character of choices were neglected... Murdoch identifies the limits and substitutes an unexplored individualism for positive social and political engagement. In a set of articles and talks she questions the existentialism to which she had been attracted at the end of the war. She criticises existentialism for imagining the individual as existing outside of historical and social determinants. In 'The Existentialist Political Myth' she concludes, 'What answers does existentialism offer? It offers no answer. Its concept of value is problematic, a question mark. But it is an expression of a passionate and sincere desire to keep to the middle way, to preserve the values of an innocent and vital individualism in a world which seems to menace them from both sides. We may well feel sympathy with this passion, and with the cry of distress which accompanies it. It is not yet clear what will show whether or not the myth represents a tragic delusion.' (Murdoch, 1997 e, pp. 144-5) In 'Existentialist Bite', a review of Everett Knight's *Literature Considered as Philosophy* she sees existentialism as perhaps contributing to a refurbished Marxism to which she is sympathetic. Yet she adds, 'But its appeal as a philosophy is at present through its most non-Marxist aspects – its dramatic solipsistic, romantic and anti-social exaltation of the individual.' (Murdoch, 1997c, p. 153) In her celebrated *Sartre- Romantic Rationalist* (1953) Murdoch relates Sartre to the contemporary philosophical and political world. At its outset she recognises how Sartre's phenomenological approach shares with contemporary Anglo-American philosophy an anti-essentialism and a scepticism over metaphysics. (Murdoch, 1953, pp. 1-11) Sartre also resembles Anglo-American philosophy in privileging the

individual over social connections and a wider vision of things. She critiques Sartre because of his focus upon the isolated individual. She observes, 'Sartre fails to emphasise the power of our inherited collective view of the world – save where it appears in the form of social prejudice and is labelled "bad faith." (1953, p. 100)

Again in 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited', notwithstanding their distinctive styles, she identifies commonalities between Continental and Anglo-American philosophy in the contemporary cultural context. She contrasts what she labels existentialism and empiricism, noting, 'Existentialism and empiricism (as I shall call it for short) share a number of motives and doctrines. Both philosophies are against traditional metaphysics, attack substantial doctrines of the mind, have a touch of puritanism, construe virtue in terms of will rather than in terms of knowledge, emphasise choice, are markedly Liberal in their political bias, are neo-Kantian.' (Murdoch, 1997f, p. 167) Murdoch does not see prevailing philosophical doctrines as commenting extensively on the social and political scene but she takes them to reflect its character. They respect science and hard-headed realism, disavow metaphysical speculation and supernatural religious doctrines and privilege the bare individual. Murdoch accepts the modern post-Kantian turn that takes thought to be limited by experience and rejects supra-natural dogma, but she is opposed to the constriction of moral, political and philosophical thought and art's rejection of its mission to represent the world and its truth. In this piece she imagines how the novel might express a remodelled Kantian sublime in portraying real and intersecting individual characters that attest to a reality beyond the tight control of the novelist.

Murdoch's concerns over the nature of post-war society and culture come to the fore in her moral thought, which she develops in articles in the 1950s and then in her celebrated essays of the 1960s that are collected in *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970)

Murdoch's critique of post-war culture and society is developed in her moral philosophy, which is set out in articles of the late 1950s and in the celebrated essays that are collected in *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970). Murdoch's moral theory is multi-dimensional in that it is highly critical of aspects of contemporary moral theory and practice, while recognising the impossibility of returning to a pre-modern era. She notes how the modern post-war world abandons transcendent principles that are disconnected to experience and how its secularism turns against religious sanctions for moral conduct. While Murdoch accepts modern scepticism over the claims of religion and speculative ideals, she is also suspicious of the move to see morality as a mere device to co-ordinate preferences. In 'Metaphysics and Ethics' (1996) she critiques the theory and practice of contemporary morality. Her critique shows how current moral theory and practice rehearses uncritically prevailing liberal assumptions. Individual choice supplants traditional notions of God or transcendent principles. In a word the post-war world of morality assumes the individualism that marks post-war political liberalism. Murdoch observes, 'Is morality to be seen as essentially centred on the individual?... if we can come out of the trees and see the wood for a moment, it is clear that this is only one type of view of morality- roughly a Protestant, and less roughly a Liberal type of view.' (1996, p. 245) In contrast to the prevailing orthodoxies, and in line with the related criticism of MacIntyre, Murdoch recognises how modern theories of morality accommodate changes in society. (MacIntyre, 1966) Murdoch contrasts contemporary liberal morality with those that derive from preceding historic theories. She highlights how modern liberal morality departs from a natural law model that presumes absolutist moral principles rather than founding moral conduct in the contingent choices of individuals. In questioning liberal assumptions she notes, 'What I have called Natural Law moralists- Thomists,

Hegelians, Marxists- and less reflective persons who are camp followers of these doctrines, see the matter in a quite different perspective. (Murdoch, 1996 p. 247) In 'Metaphysics and Ethics' she recognises the conceptual impoverishment of prevailing schemes of morality, which trace morality to unreflected individual choices. For Murdoch, it is not enough to maintain the right of liberal individuals to make choices. What matters is how we picture ourselves and imagine our moral life. The pictures that we imagine are not to be dismissed as representing otherworldly metaphysical views but rather as ways in which we identify ourselves and our possibilities in a wider scheme of things. These possibilities are constricted if we presume ourselves to constitute the centre of things, whereas we can identify ourselves differently and see ourselves as constituted by loving social relations. Hence, while recognising the vulnerability of traditional metaphysically-based theories of morality to modern iconoclasm, she concludes that to reduce morality to contemporary empiricist and liberal assumptions impoverishes our moral life. She urges more flexibility in our moral perspective, and specifically she calls for a more imaginative conceptualisation of experience that licenses more elaborated pictures of the human condition. She observes, 'Man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the pictures.' (Murdoch, 1996, p. 252)

In the 1960s Murdoch set out her own provocative moral perspective that critiqued the shallowness of a contemporary culture that reduces the self-image of an individual to what can be described in individualist and behaviourist terms. In 'The Idea of Perfection' (1970b) she parodies the ordinary language representation of morality that assimilates it to an individual making purchases in a shop. If Anglo-American moral philosophy is comfortable in its consumerism, Continental existentialism is recognised to present a more heroic version of individualism, where

an individual agonises over her possibilities. Yet these heroic and prosaic versions of morality converge in reducing it to the contingent choices of an individual. In 'On "God" and "Good"'(1970a) and 'The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts' (1970d) Murdoch develops a moral perspective that is at odds with contemporary liberal assumptions. Instead of concentrating upon an individual's autonomy, she considers the vision of the world informing an individual's choices. She offers a moral theory whereby individuals align themselves with a conception of the good that is not limited to an individual interests or choices. She invokes Plato's theory of the Good as a metaphorical transcendent magnetic force orienting individuals to an appreciation of goodness that is external to themselves and their interests. This Platonic conception of the good, for Murdoch, is not a substantive metaphysical reality as Plato himself might have imagined it. Rather it represents an imagined standard inspiring individuals to foster a self-critical perspective on how they should orient themselves in the world. Murdoch imagines that individuals are to turn their attention away from themselves to a loving appreciation of others. The upshot is that a loving engagement with a truth that is distinct from selfish preoccupations supersedes a narrow concentration upon individual's own perspective on things.

If Murdoch is clearly critical of aspects of liberal individualism, her moral theory does not abrogate the modern liberal society in which she was situated. Murdoch accepted that preceding forms of morality, vesting moral authority either in God or in metaphysical entities, were no longer maintainable. Likewise she recognised how morality in modern times demanded that Individuals themselves are to decide upon moral questions. In 'The Idea of Perfection ' she describes how a mother (M) might change her mind on how to regard a daughter-in-law (D), after initially imagining that she was unsuitable for her beloved son. In appraising her own perspective critically

and lovingly she is taken as arriving at a different point of view. Her change of perspective might be seen as conforming to a perfectionist rather than a subjectivist moral scheme, but it is a perfectionism that is neither otherworldly nor in denial of an individual's role in assessing moral issues. It is the mother herself who establishes a just way of treating her daughter-in-law by reflecting self-critically on her initial way of regarding her. She remains an independent operator, but who does not assume her immediate perspective is a true one. .

.'A House of Theory'

In 1958 in 'A House of Theory' (1997b) Murdoch reflects expressly upon the ideological climate of politics in the aftermath of the Second World War. She discusses ideology in the wider context of the cultural conditions of the post-war world. The rationalist temper of modernity and its tendency to demythologise preceding cultural myths is highlighted. In religion supernatural elements are called into question and in philosophy metaphysical beliefs are ditched, and in politics large scale belief systems are called into question. In 'A House of Theory' Murdoch maintains an attenuated commitment to socialism, but observes how full-blooded ideological commitment is waning. She remarks, 'There is a certain moral void in the life of the country.' (Murdoch, 1997b, p. 172) She observes a dissipation of energy within the socialist movement, which is due to a coalescence of factors; post-war prosperity, the entrenchment of the welfare state and a bureaucratic ossification of political life. This decline in the vitality of the socialist movement is part of a wider disenchantment and it draws upon an enduring empirical cast of mind on the part of English people. The upshot is a contemporary void of faith and declining political and moral conviction. She observes, 'This void is uneasily felt by society at large and is the more distressing since we are now for the first time in our history feeling the loss

of religion as a consolation and guide; until recently various substitutes (socialism itself, later Communism, pacifism (internationalism) were available; now there seems to be a shortage even of substitutes.' (1997b, p. 180)

Murdoch's reading of ideology in post-war Britain harmonizes with a wider sense of the decline of ideology that was identified in Anglo-American sociology and political science. In 1960 Bell in *The End of Ideology* (1962) observes how ideological fervour, notably commitment to fascism and communism, had declined. He pointed to a lack of faith in social engineering and utopianism allied to contemporary prosperity that is buttressed by the operation of welfare schemes, as eliminating the desire for and prospect of radical change. He concludes, 'In the Western world, therefore, there is today a rough consensus among intellectuals on political issues…the ideological age has ended.' (Bell, 1960 pp. 402-3) Likewise in *Political Man- The Social Bases of Politics* (1960) Lipset, the American political scientist, argued that the mix of conflict and consensus in Western societies is conducive to political stability and leads to the exclusion of radical ideologies from the political system. Murdoch anticipates these political sociologists in sensing a decline in ideological commitments. She sees this decline as of a piece with the rationalisation of religion, the retreat from metaphysics and the first order theorizing about morality. God is dead and perhaps socialism and other ideologies are dying. The increase in welfare provision and the alleviation of poverty deflects from socialism, due to its removal of a major source of unrest. The unappetizing bureaucratic delivery of welfare renders the prospect of collective socialist action less attractive. Red tape rather than inspirational solidarity assumes the emblem of socialism. It is hard to maintain fervour for the ideology of socialism when sheer want has been relieved

and the realities of queuing and bureaucratic delivery quell the romanticism of political action.

Murdoch is perceptive in connecting the decline in ideology to the disavowal of metaphysics and the general subscription to more limited styles of analysis in philosophy. Certainly political philosophy in the immediate post-war period was restrained in its aspirations, reining back speculative tendencies in the shade of the critique of metaphysics that had been undertaken by logical positivism. Peter Laslett in his Introduction to *Philosophy Politics and Society* vol. 1 (1956) proclaimed the end of political philosophy. Berlin in his lecture, 'Two Concepts of Liberty' argued for a commonsensical account of negative liberty and diagnosed positive liberty, as it was set out by radical or adventurous political theorists such as Rousseau and Hegel, to be dangerous in limiting the ordinary freedom of an individual to choose this rather than that.

MacIntyre in 'The End of ideology and the End of the End of Ideology' (1971) recognised how 'the end of ideology' thesis responded to changes in post-war Western theory and practice, but he also noticed how ideology had re-emerged on to the political agenda of Western societies in the 1960s. But more than that, he highlighted how the notion of the end of ideology itself represented a kind of ideology. He observed, 'The Lipset-Bell vision of the world is informed by a view of rationality which makes liberal, pragmatic man the paradigm of rationality' (1971, p. 9) In the context of a general decline in ideological thinking in the 1950s and of a prevailing reluctance on the part of philosophers to engage in first order political theorising, Murdoch herself in 'A House of Theory', recognises the limits within which ideological argument is to operate. Yet, like MacIntyre, she is not persuaded that ideology is dead. Unlike Bell and Lipset, she does not give up on ideology and does

not serve herself a completely self-denying ordinance. Murdoch acknowledges the problematic character of establishing a metaphysical reading of politics in a scientific age, but she proposes projecting possible conceptual representations of utopian possibilities for socialism. She imagines these utopian projections as legitimate ways of continuing the ideological representation of socialist possibilities.

Murdoch likens what she proposes to develop socialist ideology to Hegel's procedure in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* where he imagines a multiplicity of shapes of consciousness that throw collective light on what it means to be a consciousness and how consciousness can operate in the world and deliver on its own claims and become aware of its own conditionality. Socialism might be imagined ideologically by relating images of possible socialist experience to serve as guides as to how socialism might be undertaken. What she is seeking is to renew the ideological imagination while subscribing to the practical and scientific limits of the modern age. In pointed contrast to the 'liberal' ideology of the end of ideology theorists, she notes, 'It is dangerous to starve the imagination of the young. We require, in addition to our "science", a social analysis which is both detailed and frank in its moral orientation. A more ambitious conceptual picture, though out anew in the light of modern critical philosophy and our improved knowledge of the world, of the moral centre and moral direction of socialism would enable those of us who are not experts to pick up the facts of our situation in a reflective, organised and argumentative way: would give us what Shelley called the power to imagine what we know' (1997b, p. 181) To support this project, she also considers drawing upon the practical experience of forms of guild socialism so as to frame possibilities for socialist experimentation.

The Early Novels

Murdoch's early career reflects her reading of her contemporary context. In her theoretical essays she is alert to the nature of the post-war world, in which the growth of material prosperity and scientific achievement had undermined confidence in preceding unifying myths. At the same time her theoretical essays show her commitment to renewing the socialist project, and they critique subjectivist currents in moral theory and practice. (See Browning, 2018). Did Murdoch's novels reflect her political interests? Murdoch denied expressly that she was a political novelist. (Murdoch, 2013) Of course the views of authors are to be respected, but views have to be interpreted. Certainly Murdoch did not canvas a set of doctrines in her novels. What she disliked about contemporary crystalline novels, such as those by Sartre and Camus, was how they presented a set of views rather open up to a world of free and distinct characters, whose actions are not dictated by a set of authorial views (Murdoch,1997a). But Murdoch's reluctance to impose her own views on her novels does not entail that her novels do not reflect her reading of the contemporary world.. The characters in her novels are realistic and hence display attitudes and confront issues that disclose the post-war Western world. In doing so they reflect the contemporary political scene and so while not rehearsing directly Murdoch's own political views, her novels deal with themes that relate to the post-war world of politics.

Murdoch's first novel, *Under the Net* (2002) has an unreliable narrator, Jake Donoghue, whose unreliability is an index of the changing nature of society. At the outset of the novel he is looking for a place to stay, and his lack of roots serves as a metaphor for his lack of enduring commitments. Jake's rejection of conventional attitudes reflects a contemporary loss of ordering frameworks. Morals can no longer

rely upon traditional means of support and the ordering myths of religion and politics no longer convince. The Bohemian Jake is drawn to the philosophical scepticism of his friend, Hugo Belfounder, whose scepticism embraces doubting the efficacy of language to describe things. In answering a question on whether or not one can be accurate in stating one's feelings, Hugo maintains, '"One can't be…The only hope is to avoid saying it. As soon as I start to describe I'm done for."' (Murdoch, 2002, p.67) Hugo's scepticism is an exaggerated expression of the sceptical rationalism of the modern world. The cultural mood is against the construction of elaborated moral and political theories and current individualism is reflected in Jake's egoism, which leads him to misperceive other characters. His self-absorption shows what has to be countered if individuals are to take account of others. For Murdoch, morality is as much about seeing others and their situation as it is about the choices individuals make. Jake is left-wing and sympathises with socialism, but cannot adhere to Lefty Todd's revolutionary socialism, because he understands the post-war world to be one without revolutionary credentials and possibilities. Jake's reading of the prospects for socialism reflects Murdoch's own sense that the welfare state and a spiritless consumerism have weakened the prospects for radical socialism. Yet Jake's socialism is more than nostalgia for a past ideal. It reflects his distaste for commercialism and the subordination of authenticity to materialism in current society.

Under the Net delivers a fragile commitment to socialism alongside an image of London as a place in which conventions and traditions are receding and in which foundational beliefs are being questioned. Murdoch's second novel, *The Flight From the Enchanter* (2000a) reveals a troubled deracinated society and an uncertain political environment that contains frustrated and vulnerable individuals. The novel's plot focuses upon migrants, whose uncertain status heightens its sense of the

rootlessness in contemporary society. The migrants are neither of a piece nor uniformly sympathetic. The Polish refugees, Jan & Stefan Lusiewicz are strange and threatening, Mischa Fox is a sinister, demonic figure and Nina, a vulnerable dressmaker, is one of the many women, whose lives are controlled by the media magnate, Mischa Fox. Nina's vulnerability is intensified when, at the instigation of Mischa Fox, a question is asked in parliament on the status of refugees. Legally, rights for refugees depend upon their whether they were born to the west of an arbitrary point in Eastern Europe, though in practice the regulation of working migrants was lax. Nina's insecurities, however, are aroused by the interest in the status of migrants that is aroused by the parliamentary question, and having been born on the wrong side of the arbitrary line she is unnerved by the situation. She is thrown into confusion and is terrified at the prospect of having to return to an inhospitable homeland. She is at the mercy of the state and the mysterious Mischa Fox. Desperate, and unsupported by friends, acquaintances and political regulations, Nina commits suicide.

Nina's death highlights the political difficulties of being a migrant and symbolises the moral and political failings of a society that cares insufficiently for the vulnerable and ignores the plight of migrants. Murdoch's focus upon migrants in *The Flight From the Enchanter* reflects her concern for the vulnerable and her sense that rights to protect migrants should not rest upon arbitrary geopolitical judgments. At the end of the Second World War she herself worked in Graz for UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) and had witnessed at first hand the wretchedness of refugees from the war's calamities.(See Murdoch, 1945) Like *Under the* Net, *The Flight From the Enchanter* shows Murdoch's interest in the post-war political world and if the latter flags her continued commitment to socialism, the former shows her

commitment to the cause of migrants and the need to secure enabling rights. Throughout her career as a novelist and as a political theorist, she recognises the plight of refuges and the need for a human rights regime.

Murdoch's identification of a current unease within contemporary politics and religion is evident in *The Bell* (2004). In *The Bell* she imagines a lay religious community that is dedicated to communal and spiritual renewal. Its members have opted out of the outside world, and its commodification and declining faith, to undertake a shared and spiritual way of life. The community is established at Imber Court in Gloucestershire and is next to Imber Abbey, a convent of Benedictine nuns. The owner of Imber Court and the leader of the community is Michael Meade, a former teacher, who had to leave teaching when he became involved with a troubled adolescent boy, Nick Fawley. Work within the community is treated as a life enhancing and community oriented activity rather than a commercial transaction and the community is committed to spiritual worship and practice. In the aftermath of Nick Fawley's visit to the community, however, it falls apart. Jealous on seeing Michael kissing a young visitor to the community, Toby Gashe, Nick commits suicide. Michael Meade's repressed homosexuality and his inability to deal with his sexual feelings and responsibilities contributes to the tragic events but they are handled sensitively by Murdoch. This sensitivity reflects her defence of the legalisation of homosexuality in her essay, 'The Moral Decision About Homosexuality.' (1964) *The Bell* is a complex novel dealing with many inter-related themes. Socially and politically it testifies to a restlessness amidst contemporary society. It captures a dissatisfaction with traditional attitudes and practices and a sense of the lack of a clear direction forwards .The lay community at Imber Court intimates a political route away from a secular liberal society and the depiction of Michael Meade's troubled sexuality points

to the need for a more inclusive attitude towards homosexuality, which was only to be legalised in 1967. The uncertainties of the present and a political commitment to advance socialism is registered, without being developed in *The Sandcastle* (1960), where the protagonist, Bill Mor intends to stand as a Labour MP.

Murdoch's Later Political Thought

Murdoch moved away from a commitment to radical change and socialism. Her letters reveal her sensitivity to the dangers of the political imposition of radical doctrines and she came to favour a limited style of politics, which offered security for the individual. Her late conception of politics is set out in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992a) in which she elaborates a comprehensive metaphysics. In the chapter 'Morals and Politics' she provides an integrated understanding of the relations between politics and personal morality. In this late account of politics she warns against the dangers that can be unleashed in the name of radical political ideology. Her direct experience of displaced persons at the end of the Second World War and her continuing contact with Europeans of Eastern and central Europe alerted her to the calamities of repressive states. In the light of dangers of a utopian style of politics that disregarded the rights of ordinary individuals she became convinced of the value of public order and the rule of law in a liberal polity. Securing order allows for personal moral development, and for the later Murdoch the freedom of individuals to pursue the good as they see it takes precedence over the pursuit of an elusive public perfection..

'Morals and Politics' in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992b) is a subtle and intricate analysis of the public world that traces the inter-connections between morality and politics. Murdoch recognises their reciprocity, for she appreciates how

experience is not divided between discrete areas of activity. Moral thinking may observe differing areas of operation but it does not halt at borders. Hence Murdoch argues that the public world is not exempt from moral considerations. She urges that politics is to be regulated by moral norms and that this mode of regulation is distinct from personal morality even if the manner in which regulatory public norms are canvassed and experienced is affected by personal morality. Murdoch inclines towards accepting a distinction, suggested by experience, between a public political world that is regulated by highly general axioms prescribing a set of rights and rules, and a personal sphere in which individuals aspire to perfectionist moral goals. Personal moral life is likened to a spiritual journey, in which the self develops through its moral encounters with others, and assumes personal responsibilities given that the self possesses particular talents and maintains specific relations to others. Public life protects the basic requirements for a decent life. She observes that the distinction signalled by the phrase,'…political philosophy is about "advice to princes", or politicians, or citizens, whereas moral philosophy is aimed at each particular thinker or agent', deserves to be kept in mind. (Murdoch, 1992b, p. 351)

Murdoch's subscription to a distinction between private and public morality does not imply an absolute separation between two spheres and is not sanctioned by unassailable philosophical argument. Mill in *On Liberty* (2016) distinguishes between self-regarding and other regarding actions in stipulating that the law should only regulate the conduct of individuals insofar as they affect others adversely by inflicting harm. For Mill, the state has no business interfering in the self-regarding actions of individuals. However, it is notoriously difficult to designate actions that are purely self-regarding. Suicide and drug-taking, for instance, affects others in that friends and

family members are affected by these apparently self-regarding actions. Pornography might seem to be an indulgence that does not harm others but it can be said to distort the way in which women in general are regarded. Murdoch is aware of the difficulties in establishing a watertight distinction between the private and the public. She does not invoke general principles of reason in drawing a distinction, but relies upon the comments of empirically-minded philosophers such as Hume and Hobbes, who point to the dangers in social life that experience suggests require intervention. Murdoch is mindful of the tendency for plans to go wrong in the public realm and of the dangers of misguidedly pursuing Utopianism.[1] Her recognition of the evident harm inflicted upon their populations by the recently deposed repressive regimes of Eastern Europe that purported to lead Utopian projects, reinforces her respect for the liberal protection of the individual. In highlighting the public duty to protect the individual she remarks, 'Liberal political thought posits a certain fundamental distinction between the person as citizen and the person as moral-spiritual individual.'(Murdoch, 1992b, p. 357)

While distinguishing personal morality from the public sphere, Murdoch observes their connections. Without receiving protection in the public sphere. Individuals would be obstrcted in their pursuit of moral ideals. She also recognises the problematic nature of establishing and developing norms for the public world. The dangers that follow from lax or ill-conceived regulation of politics prioritise maintaining fundamental axioms that establish clear-cut rules to protect citizens (Murdoch, 1992, p. 352). Murdoch allows for the prospect of these rights going beyond the borders of the nation state, which reflects her lifelong appreciation of the international context of politics. [2]She urges that the public sphere should be regulated by axioms securing

the basic requirements for a decent life, for example the human rights of life and liberty so as to check the conduct of governments as well as individuals. The experiential inspiration and variety of these rights entail that the axioms governing the public world do not constitute a system or derive from an overarching philosophical formula. Again, Murdoch's sense of the contestability and variation in the formulation of these axioms across time and space mean that they are not to be seen as deriving from a supervening and universal natural law. Rather axioms evolve piecemeal as experience suggests the significance of protecting areas of life. For instance terrorist incidents might lead to increased measures of security in likely areas of terrorist attack. Changes in moral outlook such as a greater toleration of sexual diversity will lead to the extension of rights to homosexuals. Axioms change in line with changing perceptions of interests and moral commitments, so that deeply held personal moral convictions on say, ecology, that at one time seem eccentric, at a later date can be enshrined in public law.

Notwithstanding the contestable nature of public axioms and their contingent formulation, their role in securing effective order in the public sphere is linked to their command of widespread support. Their efficacy depends upon obedience, and obedience is reinforced by their moral approval by citizens. The public and the personal are related by the formulation and effective operation of axioms. Personal moral commitments serve to inspire the development of axioms and to reinforce community solidarity and the maintenance of laws and rights. There is, however, a persisting tension between the public and the personal. While the axioms and laws governing the operation of the public sphere demand adherence by citizens, on occasions individuals will perceive their personal moral commitments to conflict with

public rules. In these circumstances civil disobedience can be justified. The case for civil disobedience is explored in her novel, *An Accidental Man* (2003), in which a young American Ludwig Leferrier contemplates remaining in England to avoid the draft to take part in the Vietnam War. Eventually Ludwig returns to the United States and faces the consequences of his preceding avoidance of the draft.   Moral commitments, for Murdoch, are not merely subjective preferences that can be put aside; they are significant orienting factors in an individual's spiritual life. Murdoch endorses civil disobedience but she takes it to be exceptional and problematic, for disobedience may weaken the force of public order, which allows for and protects the development of wide-ranging personal moral commitments.

In distinguishing a public world in which the priority is to preserve order and basic rights from a private world where people strive for goodness, Murdoch looks to the realistic picture of politics that is put forward by Hobbes. Locke and Hume and the critical Marxism of Adorno rather than to the elaborate theoretical ideologies put forward by Marx and radical utopian theorists. Her late distrust of radical ideology is reflected in her critique of the Soviet Union and the suspicion of China that is expressed in her letters and in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Murdoch 1992, p. 365).[3] What she values in public morality and the practice of politics are axioms, fundamental security rights that protect individuals from the dangers of political violence and terror. If she no longer requires radical change in the political arena, what is offered in the political sphere continues to matter. In her novel, *The Nice and the Good* (2000) the principal protagonist,   John Ducane, a civil servant, investigates a mysterious death in Whitehall but in order to protect the husband of a friend, delivers a less than full report into the death. Ducane decides to put the obligations of

personal morality above those of the public domain, but he recognises the significance of the public sphere by resigning from his post.

Murdoch's turn towards a limited style of politics and the protection of basic freedoms in a liberal democracy might seem to unite her thought to that of Fukuyama. In the light of the demise of the Soviet Union. Fukuyama rethought the world of ideology and set out a Hegelian argument for the triumph of liberal democracy.[4] He maintained that history has shown how liberal democracy resolves the issue of recognition in a way that has no viable competition. Rival ideologies such as socialism and fascism have been shown to be repressive rather than to protect individuals. Their record of repression and violence speaks for itself. He urges that history points '…to an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism.' (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 3) In *The End of History and the Last Man* the end of the cold war is seen as signalling the end of mankind's ideological evolutionary development in resolving the issues of human recognition. (Fukuyama, 1992) The later Murdoch's review of the ideological scene bears an affinity with Fukuyama in that she is deeply disturbed by the historical catastrophes of Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany and opts for a cautious and liberal form of politics. Her thought is different from Fukuyama's however in that she does not see political development as coming to an end. She is suspicious of 'endism' even if the projected end is what she supports. She differs from Fukuyama in not ruling out ideological developments. Just as MacIntyre and Oakeshott, in differing idioms, see history as precluding a neat universal answer to morality and politics so Murdoch envisages history as continuing to develop and to provide new axioms to underpin political regimes.[5]

Lyotard is another theorist of the late twentieth century to whom Murdoch bears a resemblance. Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* was first published in 1979 (Lyotard, 1984). Although its publication predates the fall of the Soviet Union, Lyotard may be said to have anticipated its collapse in rejecting the universal claims of its radical ideology. Lyotard is famous for announcing the end of grand narratives and in so doing to mark the end of modernity and the beginnings of postmodernity. Modernity is defined by its imagining that objective truth can be established. Examples of grand narratives include Hegelianism and Marxism in its various guises, as well as theories of large-scale liberalism such as those provided by Rawls and Keynes. (See Browning, 2002) For Lyotard old style certainties were crumbling just as the Berlin Wall was destined to fall. What follows, for Lyotard, is a postmodern recognition that history does not constitute a single pattern. Meaning is not susceptible to neat frames of reference. Lyotard's, *The Differend* (1988) establishes how phrases operate in different incommensurable ways so that we cannot establish a single form of interpretation to link our several ways of considering things. Likewise in *Lessons on the Analytic of the* Sublime (1994) he explains how a Kantian sense of the sublime can intimate a differend, which cannot be captured in general reasoning. While Murdoch herself is opposed to forms of dogmatic rationalism, is suspicious of political utopianism and is attracted to Kant's use of the sublime, she does not call for the end of ideology. Unlike Lyotard, she imagines that there remains a role for metaphysical thinking. (See Murdoch1992a and 1993).

Murdoch and Lyotard: The Book and the Brotherhood and Grand Narratives

On the face of things Murdoch is unlike Lyotard. She is not a postmodernist. Indeed she critiques it in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992a), and she revives Plato precisely to express her commitment to an objectivist notion of the good rather than succumb to what she sees as an uncritical subjectivism. Yet there are affinities between Lyotard and Murdoch in that they both turned against forms of ideology that claim to represent the end of history and Murdoch, like Lyotard, held that there were processes of demythologisation at work in late modernity. An affinity between the two can be discerned in Murdoch's late novel, *The Book and the Brotherhood* (1987), which is a complex novel that contains interweaving plots. Its central drama concerns a *Gesellschaft*, a society of Oxford graduates, led by Gerard Hernshaw, who decide to support financially the work of David Crimmond a radical and charismatic political theorist and activist. Crimmond is to write a great book or grand narrative that will deliver a definitive critique of present society. On its formation in the 1950s, all the members of the society are of a similar radical mind and see the projected grand narrative as a means to propel society forwards. With the passage of time, things change and the remaining members of the society no longer subscribe to a left-wing radicalism. By the 1980s and like Murdoch herself, they support parliamentary democracy and are suspicious of radical political theories. They have moved on from disruptive politics, and perceive a grand narrative to represent an anachronism. The members of the society bemoan their fate. They resent the payments to Crimmond and are out of sympathy with the project. Moreover, Crimmond behaves abominably in cuckolding one of the brotherhood, Duncan Cambus by bewitching his wife Jean.

Gerard is despatched to meet with Crimmond to ascertain his progress on the project and to find out what kind of political line is being followed. Gerard's fears are realised

in that Crimmond revels in his critique of the kind of liberalism that is maintained by Gerard and his fellow members of the brotherhood. Crimmond declares, 'Of course I think this society, our so-called free society, is rotten to the core – its oppressive and corrupt and unjust, it's materialistic and ruthless and immoral and soft, rotted with pornography and kitsch.' (Murdoch, 1987, p.296). Crimmond is scornful of Gerard's liberalism and proclaims, like other radical ideologists, that he has grasped the sense of history. He maintains, 'I just belong to *now*. I'm doing what has to be done *now*. I'm doing the history of our time, which you and your friends seem to be entirely unaware of' (Murdoch, 1987 p.295). On the book's publication, however, Gerard is shocked to realise his own reaction to it. He is excited and stimulated by it. Crimmond produces a radical but provocative tome and Gerard is grateful for the stimulation that it provides. Gerard declares to his long-time friend Rose Curtland, 'He (Crimmond) thinks liberal democracy is done for. He's a sort of pessimist utopian. And of course we're right, all right I'm right and he's wrong- but my rightness- needs to be changed- shaken, uprooted, replanted, enlightened…' (Murdoch, 1987, p. 560) What is suggested by *The Book and the Brotherhood* is that though the demonic Crimmond is misguided in his radical utopian critique of society, his grand narrative nevertheless serves the vital purpose of providing a critical frame for assessing society and the politics of liberalism. For Murdoch, it is wrong to sideline ideology, or worse to proclaim it to be dead. At the end of her career, as in its beginning, she sees a continuing role for ideology. There can be no terminus for politics or theory and ideological grand narratives contribute to our on-going understanding of who and what we are.

Conclusion

Murdoch reflects upon politics, the nature of political theory and ideology throughout her life. Her own early radical political commitments combine with a recognition in her early writings that the great political myths, like the myths of religion and philosophy are receding before a modernist tide of rationalism and liberal capitalism. In the West the working class is deradicalised by a combination of consumerism and state welfare. Murdoch is a perceptive social commentator in recognising what is happening. Yet she does not abandon radicalism. Instead she urges that phenomenological images of socialist utopianism can frame a continuing appeal. Her early novels recognise changing times and a continued commitment to radical causes. She highlights the repressiveness of a political culture in which homosexuality is criminalised and all her novels after *The Bell* depict gay people empathetically. She is sympathetic to migrants, imagining them realistically in capturing their vulnerability. She is uncannily prescient in depicting their susceptibility to social and political pressures, which sadly has been a feature of more recent times. *Under the Net* depicts a society that is uncertain of its future direction even if a vague commitment to socialism is transmitted, Unlike many contemporary theorists of society Murdoch resists the idea that ideology is dead. Political questions are shown to be alive and ideology offers a way of orienting opinion in changing times.

In her late work, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) Murdoch revisits her conception of the political and perceives the priority of safeguarding the public sphere from manifest dangers. She is mindful of the ways in which radical utopian regimes have been repressive and adversely affected the lives of numberless ndividuals. Her priority is to ensure that rights are established to provide security for individuals and she turns against the radical socialism that she espoused in her youth. At the same time she recognises that thinking about the political cannot be

circumscribed and she welcomes ongoing reflection upon the political sphere and the continuing development of rights. She imagines a future in which animal rights might receive more attention and the ecological considerations might play a more pronounced role in politics. Hence in *The Book and the Brotherhood* (1987) the grand narrative of Crimmond, which rehearses a radical utopian ideology, is presented sympathetically. It seems as if Murdoch recognises the power and value of ideas and she does not envisage the end of ideology or the grand narrative as do Fukuyama and Lyotard. Murdoch shows an ambiguous attitude towards the demythologisation of large-scale beliefs in the modern world. On the one hand she accepts that metaphysics can no longer be dogmatically pronounced just as supernatural religious beliefs can no longer be maintained and transcendent principles in morality are no longer convincing. On the other hand she recognises that if our vision of the world is deprived of wider thinking on the nature of reality and the good life, our world will be reduced to a spiritless empiricism and conceptual insularity. What she favours is a continuing conceptual openness that allows for a larger vision of things without committing to supernatural or unverifiable propositions. In politics she is cautious of upholding a utopian ideology that might involve threaten individual safety, but she also favours the continued development of general visions of the political world that will allow for critical thinking and a critical engagement with our political beliefs.

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[1] Murdoch is doubtless influenced by her conservative friend Michael Oakeshott, who warned against the dangers of radical politics. He claimed that there is no destination in politics other than pursuing the intimations of tradition. See Oakeshott (1962)

[2] Murdoch's early novels show the lives of a variety of migrants and she depicted survivors from the holocaust in later novels. For a discussion of the global treatment of politics in the contemporary world and in the preceding century, see Browning(2011)

[3] She records her changing political views in letters to Philippa Foot. See, for instance, her reference to Communist China (Murdoch 1979). Also she remarks upon politics in her journals. See for instance, Murdoch (1990)

[4] Fukuyama's reading of Hegel is disputable, see my analysis of Hegel's political philosophy (1999)

[5] Oakeshott (1975)and MacIntyre (1981) see philosophy, ethics and politics as developing historically, but they both see the development as unending and lacking definitive resolution