

The Iris Murdoch Review

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The Iris Murdoch Review

The *Iris Murdoch Review* (Kingston University Press) publishes articles on the life and work of Iris Murdoch and her milieu. The *Review* aims to represent the breadth and eclecticism of contemporary critical approaches to Murdoch, and particularly welcomes new perspectives and lines of inquiry.

The views and opinions expressed in the *Iris Murdoch Review* are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the editors, production team, or Kingston University Press.

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Iris Murdoch: History Woman

In a letter to Raymond Queneau of 1946 Murdoch poses a rhetorical question, ‘The question is can I really exploit the advantages (instead of as hitherto suffering the disadvantages) of having a mind on the borders of philosophy, literature and politics’.¹ By the end of Murdoch’s career the answer to this question would be clear. Murdoch’s novels and philosophical writings represent imaginative and thoughtful achievements that comment incisively upon political issues as well as reflecting upon morality and metaphysics. Murdoch’s interweaving of politics, philosophy and literature is evident from first to last: from her moving depiction of migrants in her second novel *The Flight From the Enchanter* to her subsequent considered reading of public and personal morality in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* where she highlights the need to establish basic axioms or rights to secure public order.² Her novels imagine individuals in political dilemmas just as her philosophical writings reflect upon the inter-relations between the public and the personal. Yet to recognise Murdoch’s claims as a novelist, a philosopher and a political commentator should not obscure what constitutes perhaps the most compelling aspect of her work. In all of her writings, Murdoch operates with an informing awareness of history. Her philosophy is predicated upon her reading of historical change, just as her novels reflect and disclose a particular historical milieu. Her novels and her philosophical writings recognise the historicity of their subject matter. Philosophy for her is not timeless and a modern philosopher has to deal with modern issues just as a modern novelist is to reflect upon what it means to write a novel in modern times.

Throughout her philosophical career Murdoch comprehended philosophy in historical terms. In her application to become Tutor in Philosophy at St. Anne’s College in 1948, she wrote, ‘More recently I have had the time to see the existentialist and phenomenological movements in their historical perspective, and have been attempting to sift the valuable from the useless in their rich but confused philosophical development’.³ Subsequently in her celebrated philosophical essays that constitute *The Sovereignty of Good* she identifies what is distinctive about contemporary forms of moral philosophy in their framing of moral commitments by reference to an individual’s will. She highlights how this subjectivism is distinct from what has gone before, when moral life and theory embraced a vision of things, whereby the individual’s will was not seen to be primary. In ‘On “God” and “Good”’ she observes, ‘Briefly put, our picture of ourselves has become too grand, we have isolated, and identified ourselves with an unrealistic conception of will, we have lost the vision of a reality separate from ourselves, and we have no adequate conception of original sin’.⁴

Murdoch recognised that moral philosophers of her time might pose as being indifferent to history but in fact they were responding to features of modernity, notably the processes of demythologisation that she saw as distinguishing modern times. Her late work on metaphysics, *Metaphysics*

as a *Guide to Morals* begins by formulating her sense of the significance of these processes of demythologisation. She remarks:

‘the pluralization or demythologisation of history, art, religion, science, which is characteristic of our age, largely takes the form of an analysis of old and prized unities and deep instinctive beliefs thought to be essential to human nature’.⁵

Murdoch identified and responded to a loss of unifying beliefs in the wake of the rise of science, technology and individualism in her fiction and non-fiction. In ‘A House of Theory’ she highlights the decline in ideological convictions in the context of a prevailing sceptical turn within post-war culture, remarking: ‘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’.⁶

In her own metaphysics Murdoch imagined an overall unity to experience that had been displaced by the anti-metaphysical temper of modern times. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* and in her unpublished ‘Manuscript on Heidegger’ she maintains connections between forms of experience such as art, religion and philosophy while acknowledging the force of a modern questioning of dogmas and accenting of individual freedom.⁷ Murdoch is modern to the extent that she values individuality, freedom and critical thinking but she imagines that individuals are to be guided by orienting metaphysical beliefs if they are to reach out towards others and follow a path that leads to goodness. The moral perfectionism that Murdoch imagines is not to be conceived as the pursuit of a supernatural end state that lies beyond imperfect critical endeavour but it involves a sense of goodness as being indefinable and embracing a vision of the world and the reality of others that supersedes a focus upon mere subjective choice. Her critique of modern moral philosophy combines a sense of its break from preceding forms of morality and philosophy with a recognition of its denial of its own historicity. Murdoch’s critique of contemporary moral philosophy resembles MacIntyre’s criticisms of modern Continental and Anglo-American philosophy. In *A Short History of Ethics* MacIntyre maintains:

‘Like Sartre the prescriptivist and emotivist do not trace the source of the necessity of choice or of taking up one’s own attitudes to the moral history of our society. They ascribe it to the nature of moral concepts as such. And in so doing like Sartre they try to absolutize their own individualist morality and that of their age [...] But these attempts could only succeed if moral concepts were indeed timeless and unhistorical [...]’⁸

Murdoch’s fiction, alongside her non-fiction, is framed by an historical sense of how the modern novel differs from preceding forms. She was critical of contemporary literature because it had lost sight of the power of evoking reality and effective characterisation as the nineteenth century novel had done. In ‘Against Dryness’ she maintained: ‘The nineteenth century (roughly) was the great era of the novel: and the novel thrived upon a dynamic merging of the idea of the person with the idea of class’.⁹ Individual characters in the novels of the nineteenth century are set against the back-

drop of society but the modern novel either succumbs to a journalistic excess of detail or strives to reduce plot and characters to the status of instruments for the rehearsal of authorial ideas and what she terms crystalline form. She maintains: 'Against the consolations of form, the clean crystalline work, the simplified fantasy-myth, we must pit the destructive power of the now so unfashionable naturalistic idea of character'.¹⁰ Against the tide of a modern turn away from the realistic depiction of things, Murdoch aimed in her novels to open out towards a sublime appreciation of characters that cannot be reduced to the neatness of a crystalline form. She invoked Kant to justify her sublime reading of what the novel can do. Nineteenth century realism could not simply be revived. The modern novel cannot rehearse the self-confident realism of the great nineteenth century writers, whose fiction reflects the contemporary surge of social forces and the consolidation of Western nation states but a modern novelist might envisage a range of characters that can strain against the confines of authorial form so as to allow a sublime intimation of real human individuals.¹¹

Murdoch's attitude to the demythologising forces of modernity was ambivalent. On the one hand, she thought that challenges to traditional beliefs and the freedom that was now enjoyed by individuals were not to be dismissed. Freedom and a critical perspective that eschews supernatural justifications of religion and questions presumed moral and political truths are not to be denied. On the other hand, she resisted a wholesale ditching of metaphysics, religion and moral and political ideals. She combined a historical sense that the present questioning of traditional forms of life was the context in which she must work, with a determination to sustain forms of thinking that might underpin a philosophical exploration of reality that would enable individuals to see their lives as meaningful and to relate their conduct to an informing moral vision. The questions that Murdoch addresses in her philosophy are historical, in that they emerge from and reflect a specific historic culture. Questions arise out of experience, which is necessarily present, but relate to a past from which they have emerged. Murdoch's thought arises out of a particular, modern historical conjuncture. The questions that are posed in the modern world are different from those that have gone before. Modern philosophy in a spirit of rational inquiry that is exemplified by Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* takes the dogmas of the past to be unacceptable. While Murdoch does not abandon metaphysics she recognises that the intricacies of metaphysical thinking must now recognise experiential limits that condition its work.¹²

If metaphysics is to serve as a guide to morality it must deal with the current historical situation. In the wake of disintegrating demythologised traditions, Murdoch's philosophy represents a countervailing response, which continues metaphysics in a post-metaphysical age by drawing together forms of thought and action so as to make sense of them as a unity. Her metaphysics does not rely on top down first order principles but works with the grain of experience.¹³ It does not shirk the dissonance and fragmentation of late modernity but maintains a continuing commitment to orient personal and moral development by attending to unifying notions of truth and goodness that are evidenced within lived experience. Hence religion is to be valued for its orienting capacity to value experience as a whole rather than for its supernatural claims. In the light of the political traumas of the twentieth century, utopian schemes for political renewal are to be abandoned in favour of pro-

tecting the rights of individual citizens.¹⁴ Again, representational claims for art are to be modified rather than revived, so that its role in enabling an individual to perceive things accurately is to be cherished notwithstanding the iconoclastic temper of the contemporary world.¹⁵

In engaging with the historical questions of the present, Murdoch turns to Plato and Platonism. She revives Plato in a modern context to challenge prevailing cultural and philosophical presumptions. In doing so, however, she interprets Plato in the light of the modern world, and does not conceive of Plato and Platonism as otherworldly forms of thought. Martha Nussbaum is wrong to take Murdoch's thought to be Platonic in an otherworldly sense.¹⁶ Plato's thought is susceptible to many interpretations and Murdoch interprets Plato as providing an account of the Good and perfectionism that can challenge contemporary forms of subjectivism without assuming a supernatural or otherworldly form.¹⁷ In interpreting other philosophers Murdoch acknowledges that she goes where the honey is.¹⁸ She acknowledges how in making Plato relevant to her own thought and age she is interpreting Plato in a particular light. Perhaps, as Gadamer suggests, she is fusing past and present horizons.¹⁹ Conradi observes how it is difficult to distinguish between Murdoch and Plato in considering Murdoch's reading of Plato.²⁰ Murdoch admits, 'In my own case I am aware of the danger of inventing my own Plato and extracting a particular pattern from his many-patterned text to reassure myself that, as I see it, good is really good and real is really real'.²¹ Murdoch turns to Plato in recognising the redundancy of previous forms of religious truth. Plato's notion of the Good can serve as a metaphor for the magnetic force of a sense of goodness that supersedes a merely subjective form. But the force of the metaphor depends upon reading Plato in a spirit that is consonant with a modern context that eschews supernaturalism. In drawing upon Plato, Murdoch not only shows a sense of how the modern context of philosophy and morality differs from preceding ones, but she also operates self-consciously in interpreting a preceding philosopher in the light of the circumstances of her own time as well as that of the past author.²²

Murdoch's philosophy arises out of her reflection upon modern culture, and her novels, insofar as they aspire to be realistic and truthful, reflect her times just as her critical reflection aims to make sense of those times. For instance, her novel, *The Time of the Angels* reflects the current religious atmosphere.²³ The phrase, 'the time of the angels' conveys a world that is subject to the death of God and the phrase crops up again in *The Philosopher's Pupil*. The sense of a world without God informs all of the novels.²⁴ In *The Time of the Angels*, the setting is one of which Murdoch observes elsewhere, 'The destruction for which Nietzsche called has taken place.'²⁵ Its focus is upon Carel Fisher, a rector who no longer believes in God and who substitutes existentialist assertion for moral restraint to the extent of breaking the incest taboo. His ineffectual brother Marcus is writing a book that aims to establish a non-theocratic basis for morality in a godless age but Carel is shown to be powerless to protect his ward in the face of his brother's amorality. The uncertainties of Marcus reflect the indeterminate status of religion in a modern demythologised world and these uncertainties inform the action of Murdoch's novels. What remains in the wake of a waning of belief in the supernatural elements of religion, such as the existence of a personal God, the resurrection of Christ and God's miraculous intervention into the world is a question that is taken up by the priests, iconoclasts and

moralists who populate her novels. The rational temper of the modern age and its corrosive effect upon traditional beliefs constitutes a contextual component of the world that individual characters negotiate in her novels. Niklas Forsberg, in *Language Lost and Found: On Iris Murdoch and the Limits of Philosophical Discourse*, conceives of Murdoch's novels as pursuing a kind of philosophy in registering a loss of traditional concepts in the ways that their characters struggle to make sense of their world. He remarks, 'What drives my work here is the thought that a loss of concepts is something that permeates our culture and is not something that can be reduced to a loss of a certain set of words that we can do without'.²⁶

Of course, Murdoch's novels are indirect rather than direct expressions of how she understands the world. They reflect rather than expound the issues of modern identity that are discussed directly in her philosophical writings. But her novels aim to be truthful in composing pictures of how individuals negotiate the world, of how they cope with its contingencies and of how they explore the freedom and respond to the challenges of modern times. The novels' characters question the orienting myths of preceding times and work within contemporary conventions and social practices that allow for choice and freedom in contrast to their previous rigidity and constraints. Characters in Murdoch novels explore sexual freedom, practise homosexuality and have abortions and reflect upon these matters without recourse to previously authoritative pronouncements on the part of the state or church. The novels show the decline of ideological politics in the aftermath of the Second World War but also point to troubling political issues such as the situation of migrants, the acceptability of civil disobedience and the continuing role of grand narratives in politics. *The Book and the Brotherhood* (1987) appears to see a role for radical critical political theory even if it critiques what Murdoch in her later years took to be the positive features of Western liberal democracy. The novel's discussion of the possibilities of a grand theory of politics in the late twentieth century reflects Lyotard's discussion of the contemporary relevance of grand narratives and show how the historicity of the present is a feature of Murdoch's novels just as it underlies her philosophical thinking.²⁷

Murdoch is a multi-dimensional thinker and author, whose novels and philosophical writings explore features of the post-war world. She is notable as a thinker for many things but an unremarked and significant aspect of her thinking is her self-consciousness in addressing the historicity of the forms of philosophy and literature with which she engaged. She participated in philosophical debates, recognising that the philosophies against which she was setting her own theories were products of a particular historical conjuncture. Likewise in literature she sought to counter the prevalent style of modern novels. Her self-consciousness of the moment enabled her to focus upon composing a different kind of novel and to make a telling contribution to contemporary philosophical debate by observing what had been lost by the development of critical modern forms of thinking. Her novels are not designed to make a succession of philosophical points, nonetheless they deal with issues of the moment and of the age, showing political, moral, religious and philosophical features of the present to which her philosophical writings were directed. Murdoch may have been a philosopher and novelist but she was also a history woman.

Endnotes

- ¹ Iris Murdoch, 'Letter to Raymond Queneau', 17 October 1947 in A. Horner and A. Rowe (eds.) *Living on Paper – Letters from Iris Murdoch 1934-1995* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2015), p.99.
- ² Iris Murdoch, *The Flight from the Enchanter* [1956] (London : Vintage, 2001); I. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London : Chatto & Windus, 1992).
- ³ Iris Murdoch, 'Application for the Post of Tutor in Philosophy', St. Anne's College Library, p.1
- ⁴ Iris Murdoch, 'On "God" and "Good"' in I. Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystic: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), p.138.
- ⁵ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.
- ⁶ Iris Murdoch 'A House of Theory' in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997).
- ⁷ Iris Murdoch, 'Heidegger: Pursuit of Being' Iris Murdoch Archive, University of Kingston.
- ⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p.246.
- ⁹ Iris Murdoch, 'Against Dryness' in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), p.291.
- ¹⁰ Iris Murdoch, 'Against Dryness', p.294.
- ¹¹ Iris Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited', in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997).
- ¹² Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, pp.431-60.
- ¹³ I deal with these issues at greater length in related publications. See Gary Browning, *Why Iris Murdoch Matters* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018) and Gary Browning *Murdoch On Truth and Love* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2018).
- ¹⁴ For a wider discussion of how political theories change with changing times, see Gary Browning, *Global Theory from Kant to Hardt and Negri* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011) and Gary Browning, 'A Globalist Ideology of post-Marxism? Hardt and Negri's *Empire*', *Critical Review of international Social and Political Philosophy*, 8 (2), 2005.
- ¹⁵ Murdoch's argument for the sublime in fiction is linked to Lyotard's Kantian argument for the sublime as a way of appreciating the differend in art. See Gary Browning, *Lyotard and the End of Grand Narrative* (Cardiff: UWP, 2000).
- ¹⁶ See Martha Nussbaum, 'Love and Vision: Iris Murdoch on Eros and the Individual', in Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (eds.) *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- ¹⁷ For an outline of Hegel's view of Plato, see Gary Browning, *Hegel and Plato Two Modes of Philosophising about Politics* (New York: Garland Press, 1991).
- ¹⁸ Iris Murdoch, 'Heidegger: Pursuit of Being', Iris Murdoch Archive, University of Kingston.
- ¹⁹ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* trans. and revised J. Weinscheiner and D. G. Marshall (London: Sheed and Ward, 1960) and Gary Browning, *A History of Modern Political Thought: The Question of Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- ²⁰ Peter Conradi, *Iris Murdoch — A Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p.547.
- ²¹ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, p.511.
- ²² See Gary Browning, 'Agency and Influence in the History of Political Thought: The Agency of Influence and the Influence of Agency', *History of Political Thought*, 31 (2), 2010.
- ²³ Iris Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels* (1966) (London: Vintage, 2002).
- ²⁴ Iris Murdoch, *The Philosopher's Pupil* (1983), (London: Vintage, 2000), p.187.
- ²⁵ 'The Existentialist Hero' in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), p.109.
- ²⁶ Niklas Forsberg, *Language Lost and Found- On Iris Murdoch and the Limits of Philosophical Discourse* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) p.3.
- ²⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* trans. G. Bennington and B. Assumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).