

Chapter Twelve: The Metaphysics of Morals and Politics
Reading Iris Murdoch's Metaphysics as a guide to morals
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Gary Browning

Introduction

Murdoch's metaphysics is dialectical and historical. It is dialectical in that it establishes a series of internal relations between forms of experience. The personal and the public, the disordered and the ordered, and unity and plurality are mutually related constituents of her relational perspective. Past and present function in a similar way. The object of metaphysical understanding is present experience, which at the same time presumes a past from which it has emerged. The historicity of the present entails the time-bound operations of metaphysics. Whereas classical metaphysics as practised by, say, Plato or Spinoza, may be taken as purporting to provide a rational first-order guide to the nature of reality, Murdoch's metaphysics operates by making sense of the relations obtaining between known items within or intimated by our experience. The questions of metaphysics, for Murdoch, arise out of reflection upon contemporary experience and its form develops historically as metaphysicians engage critically with contemporary questions and the work of past metaphysicians. Murdoch takes metaphysics to be holistic in its review of how partial forms of experience are only fully intelligible in terms of their location within the whole. Metaphysics identifies the contributions of religion, art, morality to its own integrative understanding of experience. They register the order and unities within experience that metaphysics explains holistically. Like all aspects of experience, religion, art and morals change over time. In modern times, supra-natural claims are renounced in favour of what can be known within experience.

Modernity is a time of demythologisation and it forms the context for present philosophical exploration of meaning. Hence the supernatural elements of religion are not to be sustained in the light of the prevailing rationalist temper and a critical philosophical perspective sets limits to a religious perspective as well as identifying its significance. Likewise art is understood critically by philosophy so that its sentimental and consolatory forms are dismissed, but its awareness of underlying unities is respected. Murdoch's metaphysics is not a world-denying Neo-Platonism, in which the ideal is divorced from the apparently real. Her reading of Plato allows for a modern sensibility that links speculation on the absolutely good to the nature of experience as a whole and takes the ideal to be a projection from and reflection back upon the actual. Theory and practice, imperfection and perfection and past and present are mutually implicated in an integrative metaphysics.¹

Murdoch was aware of the delicacy of her metaphysical thinking. She takes on board a thoroughly modern perspective, in which the limits of knowledge are recognised and empirical understanding is valued. Simultaneously she draws upon Platonic metaphysics to resume an ambitious conception of philosophy's role in framing a broad metaphysical picture of a multi-dimensional but unitary reality. Murdoch's last published philosophical text, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (hereafter *MGM*) focuses upon morality and metaphysics, showing how they are mutually related. Metaphysics describes unity and order, which allows for a moral perspective that goes beyond the individual ego. Morality attests to a vision of goodness that unites the self with others. Morality and metaphysics are here informed by a modern sensibility in that Murdoch highlights the processes of demythologisation that frame

¹ For a discussion of Murdoch's reading of Plato, see Browning, 2018b, 178-190.

the ways in which we understand ourselves in modern times. Science, technology and a stripped-down notion of philosophy set the tone for a modern rational instrumentalism, whereby orienting schemes of metaphysics tend to be excluded. In responding to this context Murdoch enlists a form of Platonism, which is framed so as to meet and to supersede the philosophical temper of the moment. Murdoch's Platonism is stripped of any associations with otherworldliness. Plato is invoked to provide a sense of the unity and truth which are the goals of philosophical understanding and which can anchor the pursuit of moral perfection. Truth and unity are perceived through art, religious practice and moral engagement, though the working towards truth and goodness is never to be completed.

Murdoch's metaphysics invokes preceding philosophers in establishing a way of seeing the world in which metaphysics is not abandoned but is undertaken so as to work with a demythologised present in recognising aspects of experience that perceive unity and goodness. Metaphysical exploration, for Murdoch, is not a matter of supra-mundane insight but a historically situated activity that reveals the dialectical interplay between forms of experience and how they constitute a whole that is meaningful. Murdoch's reading of public and private morality, of the political and the personal, exhibits how she operates in providing metaphysical insight by perceiving the relatedness of aspects of experience. Personal morality depends upon public morality just as the point of the public world is to allow individual exploration of the personal. Public forms of morality are also shaped in part by personal exploration of experience just as the goodness of public life demands respect on the part of individual citizens. The moral perfectionism of personal morality underlines a commitment to the order and goodness of experience just as awareness of the calamities have befallen the public world admits evidence of manifest political imperfection. Order and disorder, goodness and evil, and the public and private are intertwined within experience and the point of Murdoch's metaphysics is to show how they can be seen as working together. Murdoch had registered the distinctness of and connections between the political and moral worlds in her 'A Postscript to "On "God" and "Good"' (1966) in which she declares, 'The idea of excellence has then a different operation in morals from its operation in politics, since a final acceptance of imperfection and incompleteness is built into politics in a way in which it is not built into morals' (Murdoch 2011, 8).

Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals

Murdoch analyses relations between the personal and the political spheres in Chapter 12 of *MGM*, 'Morals and Politics'. It highlights the limits of the public sphere and the perfectionism of personal morality. The meaning of the one sphere depends upon its relation to the other. In her early novels and philosophical essays Murdoch had entertained diffuse hopes for a socialist renewal. Jake Donoghue in *Under the Net* (1954) is confused about politics but remains a socialist. *The Bell* (1958) rehearses the aspirations and demise of a spiritual community that sets up a co-operative form of life. In her essay 'A House of Theory' (1958) she recognises how demythologisation in contemporary culture erodes belief in metaphysics, religion, visionary morals and radical political ideology. Hence, after the Second World War socialism faces challenges, notably due to a quiescent working class, apparent material affluence, and a gathering sense that radical ideological theories are untenable in the modern world (Murdoch 1997, 182). In her 'A Postscript to "On "God" and "Good"' (1966) she recognises how politics is distinct from morals due to the imperfections of the public sphere (Murdoch 2011, 8). By the time she writes *MGM*, Murdoch herself is thoroughly disillusioned with political utopianism. She is alert to the historical evidence that points to the horrors of misguided Utopianism. The repressiveness of current and recent socialist regimes, such as Communist China, underpins her distaste for radical socialism and

her concern to protect the rights of the individual against the state (*MGM*, 354-7). Her suspicion of totalitarianism is reflected in her novels, where survivors of repressive regimes, such as vulnerable Willy Kost in *The Nice and the Good* (1968) serve as haunting reminders of its dangers. Likewise her letters and journals attest to her recognition of the wreckage of human life that she had witnessed in the aftermath of European dictatorships and the Second World War.²

In 'Morals and Politics' Murdoch turns decisively away from radicalism and utopian projects. She looks to the wisdom of past political philosophers such as the British empiricists who focus upon the limited but significant task of the state in providing security for individuals. This imperative to protect the individual is acknowledged to involve a distinction between the private and the public. She recognises this distinction to be central to classic liberal thought. She observes, 'Liberal political thought posits a certain fundamental distinction between the person as citizen and the person as moral-spiritual individual' (*MGM*, 357). While accepting the imprecision of the terms of the distinction, she is willing to invoke it so as to limit the power of the state. She remarks that, 'Society and so the state *cannot* be perfected, although perfection is a proper ideal or magnet for the individual as a moral agent.' (*MGM*, p. 356) The distinction between the private and the public and the prioritisation of individual freedom are held by Murdoch to be distinctively modern. She recognises how Plato did not recognise the value of individual freedom and notes that Plato's ideal commonwealth of the *Republic* sets the common good above that of individual satisfaction. (See Browning, 1991)

Murdoch's observation that the distinction between the private and the public is both relatively new and less than clear cut is accurate and is rehearsed by many political theorists.³ In *On Liberty* J.S. Mill identifies the rationale for governmental activity and its limit to be that of preventing harm to other individuals (Mill 1989, 10). Mill values individual liberty and he rules out governmental regulation of an individual's conduct when other individuals are not affected. Hence Mill distinguishes between self-regarding and other-regarding actions as determining the sphere of liberty to which individuals are entitled (Mill 1989, 34). This distinction is very difficult to specify precisely. All actions in some sense affect others, just as their inspiration is not merely private. Murdoch recognises the indeterminacy involved in separating a private sphere from a public one but maintains a difference between the two in order to protect an individual from violence, coercion and the dangers of an overly powerful state. She sees security to be vital for individual well-being and urges that politics must be regulated by fundamental moral norms. This proposed mode of regulation is distinct from personal morality even if regulatory norms are affected by the latter. She accepts a distinction that is useful even if it is hard to specify in precise terms. She distinguishes between a public political world that is to be governed by highly general axioms prescribing rights and rules, and a personal sphere of moral aspiration to which an individual is to be committed. Personal moral life is perfectionist. An individual is to aspire to do the right thing. Personal morality is a spiritual journey, where the self develops via its moral encounters with others and aims for perfection. Public regulation attends to the imperfect political world where individuals are liable to suffer. It is not perfectionist but rather guards against manifest imperfections by protecting the basic requirements for a decent life. Murdoch observes, 'Society, and so the

² Murdoch's journals are held in Kingston University Library, and a collection of her letters was published in Horner and Rowe (2015).

³ For analysis of the complicated relations between the individual and society, see Browning 1999, Browning 2005, Browning 2016 and Berlin 1969.

state, *cannot* be perfected, although perfection is a proper ideal or magnet for the individual or moral agent' (*MGM*, 356).

Murdoch's distinction between private and public morality does not amount to an absolute separation between two spheres and is not sanctioned by unassailable philosophical argument. It is a pragmatic way of drawing a line that works to protect individuals and to guard against the excesses of state intrusion into individual lives. It is a product of reflection upon modern political history. She is critical, however, of the Hegelian project of identifying an overall pattern to the development of history, and of Hegel's Marxist successors who posit an end to history and justify political actions in terms of this endgame (*MGM*, 370). Murdoch is against any totalising political judgments that abstract from a messy contingent world in which rights are to supersede any projected end state. Her political priority is to protect individual rights. She argues, 'The idea of Utopia is a danger in politics, it hints at a rectification of a primal fault, a perfect unity, it is impatient of contingency. The assertion of contingency, the rights of the object, the rights of the individual, these are connected' (*MGM*, 378).

In establishing the limits that have to be respected in considering politics and in her critique of Hegel and Marx, Murdoch invokes Adorno's neo-Hegelian critique of Hegel. Adorno reacts against the Hegelian tradition by critiquing totalising forms of thought. In contrast to Hegel's reading of the inter-relations between subject and object in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Adorno admits the independence of the object. He rejects a finalising dialectic that is to yield a final solution to the exigencies of experience. Adorno allows for a negative and continuing open dialectical interplay between subject and object. Murdoch comments approvingly,

This dialectical give-and-take mutually necessary relation between subject and object is not to be understood in a Hegelian manner as taking place within any sovereign determining totality, whether Hegel's absolute, or a Marxist idea of history as a story with a happy ending. (*MGM*, 370)

Adorno's approach recognises contingent events that cannot be encapsulated in a tight theoretical scheme. Yet he also allows for inter-relations between the elements that are to be theorised. Murdoch sympathy for Adorno sheds light on her thought. She avoids totalising political thought by recognising a distinction between the personal and the public. They allow for differing objectives. In taking her cue from Adorno, however, Murdoch allows for interaction between the public and the private. Public laws are to protect and serve the individual. Perfectionist personal morality depends upon protection of the self from public imperfections. Again, personal moral thinking can contribute to the public agenda by framing ideas on how the welfare of individuals can be best secured by public provision. Murdoch envisages a mutual dependence or a kind of dialectic between the public and the private, though their separation is to be highlighted so as to prioritise the protection of the individual. Murdoch observes, 'The idea of a separation (between the public and the private) is better here than that of dialectic or tension within a totality: it both emphasises a very (general) liberal) political value, and also helps to make sense of political scenes' (*MGM*, 367).

While personal morality is perfectionist, the public sphere is not set on achieving an ideal that might not be realisable. It is flexible and accommodates to the needs of the moment and deals with imperfections and deficiencies that require practical remedies. The dangers to individual welfare that follow from lax or ill-conceived regulation prioritise the maintenance of fundamental axioms that set up clear and firm rules that mediate the transactions of individuals. The rules of the game require to be set so as to protect fundamental needs. Murdoch urges that the public sphere is to be regulated by axioms securing basic

requirements for a decent life, for example the human rights of life and liberty should be protected. These rights need to be secured from interference by governments as well by individuals. The rights are to be derived from experience and history, reflecting what has proven to be fundamental to the ordinary pursuit of individual purposes. They demand public respect that is unconditional and unmediated, so these axioms are not to be systematised for that would detract from their immediacy. Public awareness of their absolute significance is dissipated if they are made to fit within an overarching theoretical formula. Murdoch observes, 'They are barriers of principle which are not reducible to a system' (*MGM*, 565). Rights also issue from considered reflection upon an historical changing world. They specify what is thought to be necessary in the public realm from time to time. Hence they are contestable, and they will vary across time and space, even if many of them, such as the right to life, will persist. Their historical piecemeal articulation means that they are not to be seen as the positive enactments of a supervening and universal natural law. Rather they evolve as political experience evolves and throws up issues that demand attention in the light of changing cultural moods and circumstances. There is no precise specification of the ways in which they will evolve. According to Oakeshott, a friend of Murdoch's, there are no absolutes in considering political action. No ideology can provide for the subtlety of circumstances and we must look to traditions and what they imitate rather than ideological systems. Murdoch recounts a variety of ways in which the agenda for politics develops, noting the activities of feminist movements, and of single issue groups canvassing the rights of animals and the planet (*MGM*, 369). Deeply felt personal moral beliefs, for instance ecological concern for the planet and animal rights, might at one time seem individual eccentricities but, at another point in time might well be absorbed into the norms of the public culture. Murdoch is light on detail in specifying how issues are to be handled by political institutions and more specifically on how substantive aspects of socio-economic policy will be negotiated. Her highly generic account of how axioms are put on to the political agenda by groups is elliptical, but it intimates that she envisages a plural and democratic process by which norms and issues are debated and canvassed.

Murdoch provides no clear-cut recipe for putting axioms on the political agenda and she recognises the contestable nature of public axioms. Their contestability, however, does not imply that obedience to them is optional. Public order and security depends upon their command of widespread support. Their efficacy depends upon their capacity to elicit obedience, and obedience derives from their moral approval on the part of citizens. Public morality is not entirely separate from personal morality in that individuals agree to public norms in the light of their moral beliefs. The public and the personal are linked dialectically by the formation and effective operation of axioms. Personal moral commitments inspire the adoption of axioms and reinforce community solidarity and the maintenance of laws and rights. There are, however, tensions between the public and the personal. While the axioms underpinning the operation of the public sphere demand support and obedience from citizens, on occasions the personal moral commitments of individuals will clash with public rules. Murdoch imagines moral commitments to be more than merely subjective preferences that can be put aside easily; they form part of an individual's spiritual life. A clash between personal principle and public law raises the prospect of civil disobedience on the part of an individual to register their disagreement with the law and to canvas its overthrow. For Murdoch, civil disobedience is acceptable, even necessary, but should be practised sparingly, because there is value in the maintenance of a law insofar as it provides order. Murdoch allows civil disobedience but she takes it to be exceptional and problematic. In undertaking civil disobedience in a democratic society where laws and policies reflect public opinion, an individual must be prepared to argue the case in public debate. If the debate does not lead to a

change in the law then disobedience may be legitimate but the individual who refuses to obey the law must accept punishment for an offence. Disobedience is not to be generalised because it may weaken the force of public order, which allows for the very development of personal wide-ranging moral commitments that lie behind the civil disobedience.

Murdoch's account of basic axioms in the public sphere is relatively thin on the detail of how particular axioms are to be decided upon. But it should not be thought that Murdoch is conservative in her emphasis upon order and basic rights. She allows for the possibility of international rights superseding a merely national perspective. Moreover, in *MGM* and in her unpublished 'Manuscript on Heidegger' Murdoch specifically points to the provision of women's rights (*MGM*, 361; Murdoch 1993, 58). Lovibond, though, has argued that Murdoch's novels insinuate a resistance on her part to the full moral and intellectual autonomy of women that is also reflected in her moral philosophy (Lovibond 2011, 7). In a review of Lovibond's *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*, Hämäläinen has countered by observing, 'one may suggest that her novels describe what is, rather than what should be' (Hämäläinen, 2011).

Murdoch's novels cannot be simply read off from her philosophical writings. They reflect the social world so that it is no surprise that in her novels there is a differential treatment of men and women and that men have higher social status and dominate women routinely in the course of Murdoch's narratives. This privileging of the social position of men, however, does not entail that Murdoch's attitude to women is clear cut. Dooley has observed how Murdoch's later novels show a more critical attitude to male adultery. (Dooley, 2009) Moreover, Murdoch's first-person male narrators do not determine how the novels are to be read. These men tend to be unreliable narrators and the bourgeois family structure, in which men dominate, is critiqued within the narratives.

In assessing the role of women in Murdoch's novels Johnson observes,

Iris Murdoch's novels pose in new and tantalising ways the question of what it means to write as a woman, to read as a woman. They disconcert and fascinate both female and male readers by continually questioning gender identity and transgressing gender boundaries. (Johnson 1987, 1)

The attitudes towards women of Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, The Sea* (1978) and Hilary Burde in *A Word Child* (1975) are patronising and patriarchal, but as Johnson signals, these attitudes are expressed ironically within self-subverting first person narratives. Murdoch's deconstruction of male domination is of a piece with her critique of bourgeois family structures that are shown to exert sustained damage to children. *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970) represents a devastating critique of the smug, self-satisfied bourgeois family and offers depictions of male attitudes, maintained by Julius King and Rupert Foster that incarnate the demonic and the vain. Simon and Axel, a homosexual couple, manage to achieve a workable relationship but it is outside of traditional male sexual mores and Tallis appears to be good but his saintliness is outside the norm of male attitudes. Murdoch in 'Morals and Politics' recognises that axioms establishing sexual equalities are disturbing forms of male power and are likely to be further developed in the future, while her novels pose questions for the prevalent inequalities between men and women. She does not, however, spell out a clear commitment to feminism.

Murdoch's Novels, Morals and Politics

Murdoch's reading of the relations between morals and politics in *MGM* allows for inter-relations between the two. A number of her novels also trace relations between morals and politics. Murdoch's novels do not simply rehearse philosophical doctrines but deal with issues and circumstances phenomenologically that she reflects upon in her philosophical

work. Hence novels such as *The Nice and the Good* (1968) and *An Accidental Man* (1971) show characters grappling with tensions between the spheres of morals and politics that are focused upon in her late study of the two spheres in *MGM*. What they show is that characters can feel and appreciate the distinct duties of the moral and political spheres. An individual cannot simply deny an obligation to support his state at a time of war and yet equally he or she has to consider the moral obligations of how others are to be treated. Likewise the state demands that public officials are to be held to account and yet a particular recognition of one's duties to another might be seen as requiring us to relax our concern to hold a public official to account.

The distinction between personal and public forms of morality underlies Murdoch's most expressly political novel, *The Nice and the Good* (1968). Its principal protagonist, John Ducane has to choose between his political and moral obligations. At the request of his head of department, Octavian Gary and the Prime Minister, Ducane, a legal advisor to a government department, leads an inquiry into the death of one of its members, Radeechy. At the same time, Ducane is developing a Platonic relationship with Kate Gray, Octavian's wife, who lives on their Trescombe estate in Dorset. Ducane enjoys the 'niceness' of his relations with Kate, which counterpoint the edginess of his relations with his girlfriend, Jessica, whose insecurity inhibits him from acting on his resolution to end their affair. Kate is warm and expansive in entertaining her friends, Mary Clothier and Paula Biranne, and their children, while enjoying her relaxed relationship with Ducane. She avoids demanding emotions and close observation of herself and others. Her reflecting on her relationship to Ducane is exemplary. 'How lovely it is, thought Kate, to be able to fall in love with one's old friends. It's one of the pleasures of being middle-aged. Not that I'm really in love, but it's just like being in love with all the pain taken away' (Murdoch 1968, 124).

Kate's self-absorption counterpoints Ducane's close attention to others. He is prepared to offer and receive love, and is affected by the depraved forces contaminating the political world that his investigative work into the affairs of the department has revealed. His own moral sensitivity is heightened in risking his life to save Pierce, Mary's son. In so doing he realises his love for Mary, which contrasts with the ersatz painless 'nice' love that is imagined by Kate. He takes his love for Mary to indicate a fundamental goodness in the world, to which he should devote himself. His state of mind is captured in the following observation: 'Her mode of being gave him a moral, even a metaphysical, confidence in the world, in the reality of goodness' (Murdoch 1968, 332). Ducane's insight into goodness inspires him to set up the reunion of Paula and her husband, Richard Biranne, who is implicated in the death of Radeechy. Due to his moral commitment to help Paula, he refrains from including any damaging reference to Biranne in his official report on the death. Ducane's selfless assistance to Paula reflects his sense of goodness and his personal perfectionist moral commitment. A commitment to the good demands that an individual acts according to a standard of goodness that is distinct from self-interest in its recognition of relational commitments to others. At the same time Ducane's moral perfectionism that requires his commitment to help Paula and her husband represents a dereliction of his political duty to his department and to the Prime Minister. His political duty is to provide an inclusive report, which might re-establish public confidence in the political establishment and the norms of society. Politics is above all about security and demands that citizens trust in government and its personnel. Ducane's neglect of his political duty is justified by the personal virtue of his action, but the tension between his moral and political duties leads him to resign from his post.

Ducane's resignation over his failure to produce the full facts in his report contrasts with the relaxed attitude of his head of department, Octavian Gray. At the close of the novel

the latter accepts the thinness of Ducane's report, because the Radeechy affair is of receding significance. Politics operates by doing what is pragmatically necessary. Trust in public officials is required but if there is no threat to trust then standards can be relaxed. Octavian, like Kate, is nice and bourgeois rather than committed to perfectionist moral ideals. He is temperamentally suited to being a political actor. He is concerned with what works rather than with the good. He is not overly troubled by the demands of personal morality and, as is characteristic of top civil servants, he can be economical with the truth. With a similar worldliness he also conceals his affair with a secretary, just as Kate can renew her social life in the absence of Ducane. Ducane's uneasiness at his failure to discharge his political obligation points to Murdoch's recognition of the delicate balance between political and personal moral obligations. Politics, in *MGM*, is not a Utopian project (*MGM*, 356). It is about establishing and maintaining the rules of the game, which provide security in the public world. *The Nice and the Good* shows a related recognition of the differing spheres of morality and politics. Ducane, in his personal life, can be virtuous in pursuing the good but he is also aware of the need to provide security in the public sphere. The value of the world is to be respected but it does not transcend the perfectionist obligation of cultivating goodness.

The tension between the political and the personal, which underpins Murdoch's reading of moral and political life, surfaces in another Murdoch novel, *An Accidental Man* (1971) which explores a case of civil disobedience. In the novel Ludwig Leferrier, a young American historian, opts to remain in England rather than to return to the United States to serve his state in the Vietnam war. If he returns home Ludwig faces arrest for avoiding the draft, while if he remains in England he can take up a lecturing post and marry Gracie Tisbourne. Ludwig's parents disapprove of their son's projected marriage and regard avoidance of the draft as being politically dishonourable. They urge him to return home and not to betray political principles. Ludwig is opposed to the Vietnam War on moral grounds and hence considers his decision to remain in England to be morally justified. By the end of the novel, however, and in response to his changing attitude to the marriage and to his moral and political dilemma he decides to return to the USA and to face the consequences. Clearly there are opposing arguments about what Ludwig should do. The Vietnam War excited opposition on many grounds. Indeed Murdoch in her postscript to 'On "God" and "Good"' maintains the rightness of opposition to the war (Murdoch 2011, 8). Ludwig's dilemma is complex and shaped by a number of contingent experiential considerations. His life in the UK appears attractive, he is in love and doubts the cause for which the USA is fighting.

A super power fighting for indeterminate reasons and in controversial and largely ineffective ways appears to be unworthy of support. And yet a state requires a commitment from its citizens to maintain its basic rules which may be said to include its right to wage war. In the novel Murdoch does not take sides on the issue, and records the tension within Ludwig as he battles with his love for Gracie and his strained relations with his parents and also the more general tension between the personal and the political on a leading issue of the politics of the day. Ultimately the novel shows a character facing up to the consequences of civil disobedience, and being prepared to face punishment and popular disapproval, just as in *MGM* she allows civil disobedience just as long as individuals accept civil punishment for their transgressions against the law.

Conclusion

Throughout her career Murdoch tracked political events and was deeply interested in morality. A number of her novels show characters wrestling with political dilemmas. Jake Donoghue in *Under the Net* mixes with political radicals, feels the emotional pull of socialism but cannot articulate a reasoned commitment to its creed. Gerard Hernshaw in *The*

Book and the Brotherhood (1987) eschews radical utopianism for the security of a moderate political regime that supports parliamentary democracy. Both Ludwig Leferrier in *An Accidental Man* (1971) and John Ducane in *The Nice and the Good* (1968) have insight into the importance of the political sphere and respect what it offers. Yet they also recognise the force of personal morality. Leferrier's conscience is stirred by what he takes to be an unjust war and he continues throughout the novel to maintain a principled opposition to the Vietnam War, but by its close he returns to the USA to accept punishment for his civil disobedience. His action respects a political duty to his state, just as John Ducane's resignation from his public post recognises that he owes a loyalty to the public sphere notwithstanding the strength of his moral conviction in aiding a friend in a way that runs counter to official duty.

Murdoch's analysis of morals and politics in *MGM* distinguishes personal morality from public morality and she imagines that the political priority is to protect the individual citizen from harm while the object of personal morality is to pursue an ideal perfection. The dangers of the political arena are rehearsed in a number of her novels, and are intimated in the radical utopianism of Crimond in *The Book and the Brotherhood* that ignores the needs of ordinary individuals. (See Browning, 2018a) Yet Murdoch also sees connections between the public and the personal in that personal morality depends upon an ordered public world if it is to be undertaken successfully. Hence Ducane recognises the force of public authority while he operates so as to limit what he says in an official report. Likewise political rules and ideas can be questioned and developed via individual morality. A willingness to question American involvement in Vietnam and to practise civil disobedience on the issue is a theme of *An Accidental Man* and while the novel does not prescribe any lessons to the reader the practices of civil disobedience is presented as a plausible response to a political situation if respect is also shown to prevailing political authority.

Murdoch's metaphysics operates in order to make sense of experience by showing how forms of life and aspects of experience relate to one another. In her analysis of politics and morality in *MGM* she shows how perfectionist moral aspirations are both supported by the security that is provided by political order but are also necessarily distinct from the imperfect and pragmatic world of politics. Political perfectionism is to be guarded against, given the tendency for political radicalism to generate injustice and violence, and yet the political world is also to be valued and respected as a means of securing order and justice. She recognises that metaphysics cannot provide an absolute set of principles for the political world just as moral life is to be determined by individuals situated in specific situations and making particular judgments. While Murdoch's sense that the axioms of the political world are not absolute represents a reasonable reading of the changeable historical world in which politics take place, her account is elliptical in that it does not provide a rich description of how changes of axioms might take place. She entertains the idea of international rights and governance without specifying how it might operate and she does not expand upon her recognition of women's rights to provide an indication of what further women's rights might be required. Murdoch's account of the metaphysics of morals and politics is elliptical, but it does locate politics and morals on the map of experience so as to guide judgments on what is appropriate in both arenas.

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