

Iris Murdoch and the power of love

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Anil Gomes considers Murdoch's view that morality is real and that, with the right conceptual resources, we can perceive it.

Was Iris Murdoch (1919–99) a novelistic philosopher, or a philosophical novelist? For the majority of her career, she was the latter: an ex-philosophy don who became an internationally recognized novelist, perhaps never reaching the highest echelons of the literary canon, but secure in her place as an important writer of twentieth-century British literature. And if her fiction sometimes had its detractors – Martin Amis once commented that in the Murdochian paradigm the men all have names like Hilary and Julian, and the women all have names like Julian and Hilary – that never prevented her sometimes strange and often remarkable novels from capturing and maintaining readers' affection.

But before she was a novelist, she was a philosopher: first, as a student of Classics at Somerville College, Oxford, studying Latin and Greek, ancient history and philosophy, and later as a Tutorial Fellow in Philosophy at St Anne's College, Oxford. At Somerville she was part of a generation of remarkable and distinctive philosophers: Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot and Mary Midgley all took their final exams in 1942; Elizabeth Anscombe had taken hers at St Hugh's the previous year. These individual and independent intellects were formed in an atmosphere of ongoing conversation, one in which, Mary Midgley noted, men were absent, most of them being away at the war.

Murdoch's career seems to have been brilliant from the start. She was a presence in Oxford – in campaigns, in arguments, at parties – and when she left to work in the civil service, her intense friendship with Philippa Foot continued, the two of them sharing a small flat in London, listening out for German bombs. When the war finished, she worked with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, travelling across Europe and seeing for herself the destruction of the war. She met Jean-Paul Sartre in Brussels, spent some time in Cambridge as a student, talking with Ludwig Wittgenstein and his students, and then, in 1948, was elected to a Fellowship at St Anne's, only six years after completing her final exams.

A story has built up, perhaps prompted by her later work, about Murdoch's intellectual isolation in Oxford at this time. This is a mistake. She gave talks at the Aristotelian Society, she debated with Gilbert Ryle, she was included in a BBC series on the nature of metaphysics among an esteemed company of British philosophers. She was, in short, a central part of the Oxford philosophy scene, with all that entailed. So where has the story of isolation come from? It is true that Murdoch's interests gradually drifted away from the mainstream of Oxford philosophy. Or if it's not quite true that her interests shifted, there was at least a slow shift in the idiom with which she learned to express her philosophical sensitivities, together with a realignment of her reference points. Her book on Sartre (1953) – published a year before her first novel *Under the*

Net (1954) – was well-received, as were her interventions on behaviourism, on the nature of theory, on Kant's view of the sublime. But it was her opposition to the dominant forms of moral philosophy that would lead to her most important and revolutionary work.

At this point, Murdoch was withdrawing from Oxford, terminating the university part of her lectureship in 1957, and leaving St Anne's completely in 1963. Her views on moral philosophy are set out in three papers published over this period, none of them in the mainstream philosophy journals where her former colleagues might have come across them, later collected together as *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970). She presents herself throughout these essays as opposing a certain picture of moral philosophy. It is a picture, Murdoch tells us, that can be found in the work of R. M. Hare, where moral utterances are a kind of prescription, in Sartre's existentialism, where moral value is created by our undetermined choices, and in the hero of many a contemporary novel. According to this picture, moral judgements are not in the business of describing how things are in the world. They cannot, that is, be true or false. Perhaps they express your emotions, perhaps they prescribe your actions, perhaps they announce your decisions – but whatever it is they do, they don't tell you how things are in the world. Morality, on this view, isn't a matter of finding out truths about the world; it is a matter of *choosing* which values guide your life.

Murdoch, Foot, Midgely and Anscombe – that wonderful generation of women philosophers – all rejected this idea of morality. The lessons of the war seemed to be that there is such a thing as getting it right or wrong, and that it mattered that one get it right. But Murdoch took the rejection much further than any of the others, and in a way which led her closer, in some guises, to Plato, and, in other guises, to a form of mysticism which will be familiar to anyone who has read her novels. The aim of the essays in *The Sovereignty of Good* is to replace this picture of moral life with an alternative, one that is adequate to our empirical, philosophical and moral existence.

What is this alternative picture? In contrast to her opponents, Murdoch stresses the *reality* of moral life. To acknowledge the reality of moral life is to recognize that the world contains such things as kindness, as foolishness, as mean-spiritedness. These are genuine features of reality, and someone who comes to know that some course of action would be foolish comes to know something about how things are in the world. This view is sometimes thought to be ruled out by a certain scientific conception of the natural, one that restricts what exists to the things that feature in our best scientific theories. Such a view is too restricted, Murdoch thinks, to capture the reality of our lives – including our lives as moral agents. Goodness is sovereign, which is to say a real, if transcendent, aspect of the world.

Making sense of these ideas requires a *metaphysics* of morals, one that helps us to make peace with the existence of transcendent goodness. But if morality is to move us, we need not just a metaphysics of morals but also a moral psychology: an account of how we creatures, concrete as we are, are able to know about, and be guided by, the transcendent good. Here Murdoch aims to

replace the metaphor of *choice* which dominated her opponents' work with the metaphor of *vision*. We can *look* carefully, we can *attend* to people and their situations, and when we do so, we can come to know how things are in the moral realm, to know how people have behaved, and to know what we ought to do.

This way of thinking about our capacity to be guided by the good will seem odd if you think of perception as a restricted capacity, capable of picking up on only the shapes and colours of things around us. For if that were all perception could deliver, then moral values would seem beyond its ken. But what we see depends, in part, on the kinds of concepts we have, and those with the right conceptual resources can pick up on aspects of the world to which someone else might be blind. A talented botanist, for instance, sees more in a field of wild flowers than a bored urban walker. And someone who understands kindness will see when to change a topic of conversation to avoid someone's being hurt. Perception of the moral realm requires initiation into a certain scheme of concepts, into a way of thinking about the world, and changes in conceptual schemes can enlarge, or restrict, the range of things we are able to see. For Murdoch, moral perception requires both sense *and* sensibility, and someone who possesses both can see how things ought to be.

Metaphysics and psychology come together in Murdoch's notion of *attention* – a process by which we come to see the world for what it really is. Murdoch takes the notion from her careful reading of Simone Weil, and in many ways it is her discovery of Weil that dislodges her from the comfortable ground of Oxford philosophy and gives her a language in which to express her views. Attention, for both Weil and Murdoch, is a heavily moralized notion, far removed from how it features in contemporary psychology. To attend to something is to look at it lovingly, to look at it justly. It is only by lovingly attending to things that we see them as they really are. And although I've talked about seeing *things* in general, it would be better to say that, in the moral realm, we lovingly attend to *people* – individuals with their own distinct histories and idiosyncrasies. When we attend to another, we look at them lovingly, and come to see what is required of us. Attention is our way of latching onto a moral realm that is there anyway.

Murdoch's most famous example in setting out her view is that of a mother and her daughter-in-law. Consider a mother who finds her daughter-in-law unpolished and lacking in refinement, who thinks that her son married beneath him. These views may not affect her behaviour. Perhaps the married couple live very far away, perhaps the mother is perfect in her outward demeanour. Nevertheless, she may reflect on her own prejudice, on her conventionality, on her narrow-mindedness and resolve to see her daughter-in-law as she really is. This process of *attending*, of looking lovingly and justly at her daughter-in-law, can bring her to see her daughter-in-law as she really is. This is a change in moral sensibility, and it is prompted by love.

None of this is to say that morality is easy. There are barriers to looking, often physical – when we push the needy out of sight – but psychological, too. Humans are naturally selfish creatures, and this, Murdoch thinks, is our secular version of original sin. (Murdoch took this lesson from

Sigmund Freud, but someone less impressed with Freud might find the same message in Charles Darwin.) This selfishness stops us from seeing what is there to be seen; the dear self – as Immanuel Kant puts it – gets in the way of our seeing what needs to be done. Great art can help here, providing us with an analogue for the good, and teaching us how to look carefully, to see things as they are. Looking carefully is a moral activity, and by learning how to do so, we learn how to remove ourselves from view and how to see the world as it really is.

Murdoch sets out this alternative picture with force and verve across the three essays in *The Sovereignty of Good*. But although moral realism is no longer neglected in contemporary philosophical discussion, Murdoch's distinctive views have not gained currency. Part of the problem is the elusive nature of her arguments, if any such there be, and their situation in a landscape far removed from contemporary debates. More deeply, the idea of a moral reality continues to dumbfound. For some, it smacks of a piece of supernatural mythologizing. For others, it ignores the way in which our evaluations and sentiments are projected out onto the world, bringing into existence the moral landscape. And even those who are sympathetic to Murdoch's realism have struggled to make sense of the idea that love – that wonderful, particular, parochial attitude – should play a role in revealing things as they really are.

If there is a philosopher whose views Murdoch most approaches, it is Plato shorn of his hostility to art. Goodness is real, we perceive it dimly as it is reflected around us, and part of the role of moral philosophy is to improve ourselves, to get us in a position where we can liberate ourselves from fantasy and see things as they really are. By looking carefully – by looking with love – we can see others for who they are. Here is a link between morality and fiction; both want us to recognise what can be the most difficult thing to see – the reality of other people.

So was Murdoch a novelistic philosopher or a philosophical novelist? Her philosophy, like her fiction, is populated by the varied reality of moral life: mothers who find their daughters-in-law unpolished and juvenile, concentration camp guards who are kindly fathers. There is nothing illusory about this life: the courage of a parent, the meanness of a child, are as much features of the world as cabbages and kings. And someone with a just and loving gaze can discern these aspects of moral reality just as someone with a good eye can appraise the length of a timber. But being good is difficult and that dear self, our selfish ego, gets in the way of our seeing things as they really are. If we are to do better, we need the virtues, we need beauty, we need the development of a capacity for loving attention. It is this unselfconscious and visceral belief in the enduring power of love that is at the centre of both Murdoch's philosophy and her fiction. Her work now, as then, is a provocation, where goodness is real, and love is seeing aright.

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