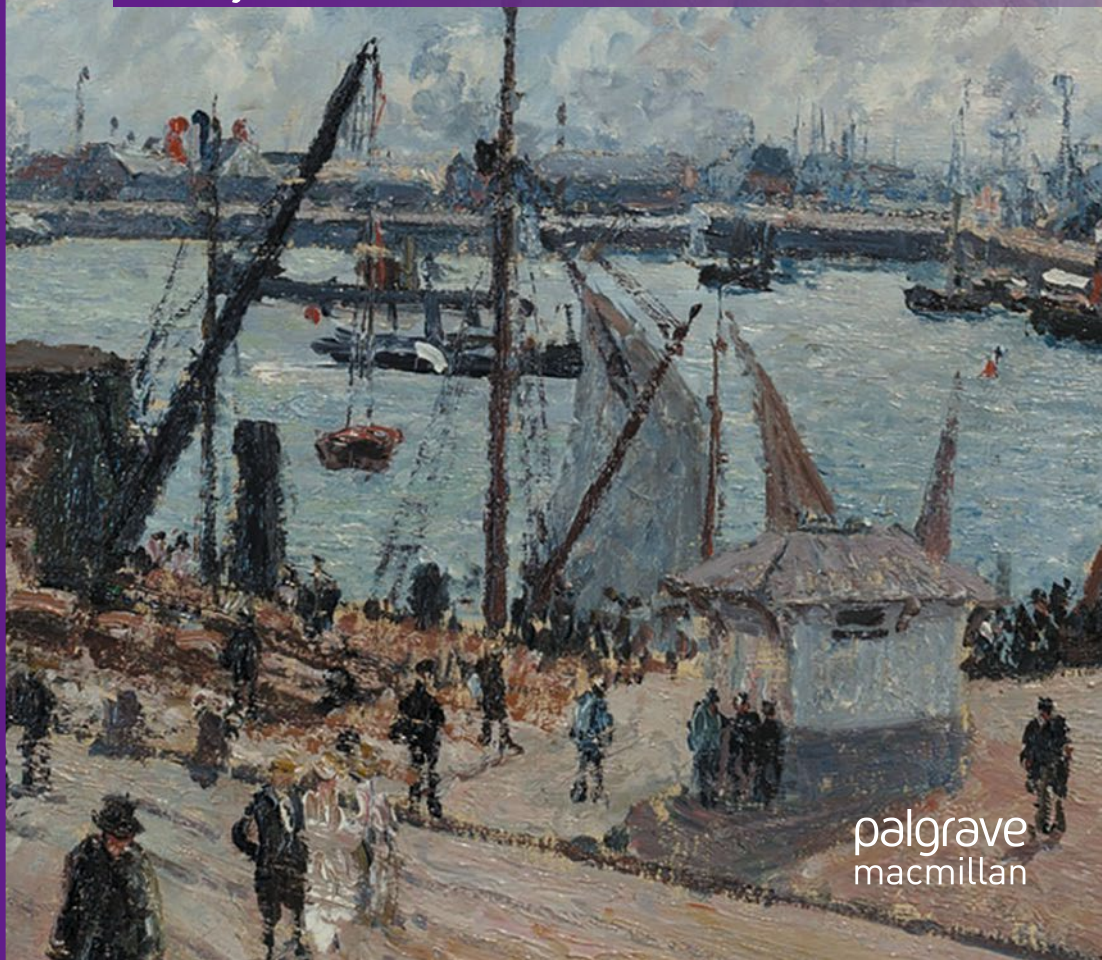
IRIS MURDOCH TODAY

Iris Murdoch's Practical Metaphysics

A Guide to her Early Writings

Lesley Jamieson



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Iris Murdoch Today

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In loving memory of my Grandma Bernice

Acknowledgements

This book began its life at Queen's University in Kingston Ontario where I first encountered Iris Murdoch's philosophical writings. I'd seen her name in passing before, but it wasn't until Jacquelyn Maxwell suggested that we read one of her essays for a reading group meeting that I actually read one of her papers. I'd never encountered anything like it before, and soon after revised my doctoral research plan. Jacquelyn and I went on to host a dedicated Murdoch reading group, slowly making our way through the contents of *Existentialists and Mystics* alongside a rotating cast of faculty members, graduate students, and independent scholars. I'm grateful to everyone who participated, but especially to Michael Vossen, Kate Lawson, Sue Donaldson, Nancy Salay, Brennen Harwood, Christine Sypnowich, and David Bakhurst.

The last of that list is the person I perhaps owe the most to. David Bakhurst was my doctoral supervisor at Queen's. It is a fact that no one has read as much of my writing as he has, and I'm very grateful for his patience with wading through so many ponderous and typo-filled early drafts. His comments characteristically encourage one to exercise greater intellectual honesty, read others with sympathy and respect for insight (even if one ultimately finds much to disagree with), and to look for the real-world significance of philosophical questions that might look rarefied at first glance.

During and after my time at Queen's, I had the good fortune to participate in Rachael Wiseman and Clare Mac Cumhaill's (Women) In Parenthesis. This research project is dedicated to recovering the neglected history of Iris Murdoch and three of her Oxford peers (Mary Midgley,

Elizabeth Anscombe, and Philippa Foot in the years prior to and during the Second World War. Clare and Rachael's work has been a profound source of inspiration and brought about a major shift in how I think about the relationship between philosophical ideas and the historical contexts they develop in. It helped me to move away from seeing Murdoch as just a defender of philosophical positions and see her as a student, a friend, an activist, and a writer, and to investigate the connection between these aspects of her person, the historical period she lived through, and the philosophical texts she penned.

This book would not have taken the shape it has were it not for the supportive network of scholars I've met through the Iris Murdoch Society (IMS). Miles Leeson and Frances White work tirelessly to foster public and scholarly interest in Iris Murdoch's literary and philosophical works, and have organized venues for us to share our work and meet one another. I benefited tremendously from the useful feedback I received on my work at their Iris Murdoch Centenary Conference at St. Anne's College, Oxford in 2019. Through IMS, I was also able to take part in the online Iris Murdoch Reading Group organized by Mark Hopwood—a source of sorely needed intellectual community during some of the loneliest days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, this past year I've called Pardubice in the Czech Republic my home, and have had the good fortune to work alongside the scholars of the Centre for Ethics as Study of Human Value (CE) at the University of Pardubice. CE is a unique place; it brings together a diverse set of scholars who are united by a commitment to making philosophy answerable to the real complexities of human life. Before arriving, I was already inspired by the work that the CE researchers have produced, particularly Niklas Forsberg, Nora Hämäläinen, and Silvia Caprioglio Panizza. I hope that my "practical" reading of Iris Murdoch's philosophy lives up to the CE ethos.

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Contents

CHAPTER 1

Approaching Murdoch's Early Philosophy

There are few who would read Murdoch's philosophy and deny that she has a unique philosophical voice. For some, it is *too* unique. During my doctoral studies, I once attended a reading group meeting where we discussed "The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts"; a first-time reader couldn't stop himself from interjecting, "well these things are very nice to assert—and she certainly paints a compelling picture—but *where are the arguments*?" He wasn't being wilfully obtuse—this scholar simply had a set of expectations for what a philosophical text should do and try to achieve in order to convince by rational means rather than to merely persuade. By his lights, it would be insulting to Murdoch to handle her writings with kid gloves rather than assessing them by these standards. Due respect means reading someone's work in such a way that it might be found wanting. The lights in question are ideals of analytic philosophy—Tony Milligan offers a useful simplification of these in "Iris Murdoch and the Borders of Analytic Philosophy" (2012), writing:

> [G]ood philosophy presents a clear, disambiguated thesis; it does so with a minimum of rhetoric; it presents one or more valid arguments for the thesis, and then considers (in a charitable manner) and responds to, the relevant

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> objections to the arguments and/or objections to the disclosed and undisclosed premises from which they draw.[1]

To this, we might add that analytic philosophers are typically committed to following where the reasons lead them rather than allowing one's personal sensibilities or prior commitments to direct one's intellectual path. A text that falls short of these standards can pull a reader up short, leading them to ask the dreaded question: "Should this really be called philosophy at all, rather than, say, *literature*?" Calling a philosopher 'literary' can be a way of denying that what they do should properly be called philosophy at all—"wasn't the late Heidegger more of a *poet*?" "Who even knows what to call Derrida …".

The professor of my anecdote was neither the first nor last to have their hackles raised by Murdoch. Hannah Marije Altorf has discussed this phenomenon at length, recalling an incident where she was (informally) told that according to philosophers in the UK in the early 2000s, Murdoch's 'philosophy' was not really philosophy at all.[2] This observation is corroborated by the sorry state that scholarship on her philosophical writings was in prior to that time. The first monograph on the topic—*Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, edited by Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker—only came out in 1996. This was 26 years after the publication of *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970). In his introduction to a comprehensive collection of essays on Murdoch's philosophy published in 2012, Justin Broackes remarks, "There are people who suspect now, I think, that Murdoch was either not quite a serious and substantial philosopher or not quite a professional, recognized by her fellows."[3] While Murdoch's relationship to her contemporaries seems to have been largely cordial, their remarks about her don't give the impression that they saw her as a fellow analytic philosopher. Ved Mehta records Stuart Hampshire describing her as "elusive" before noting that he (Mehta) thinks of her as "much more an intuitive person than an analytic one."[4] In a more oblique form of criticism, when asked about her by Mehta, R. M. Hare describes her simply as

[1] Tony Milligan, "Iris Murdoch and the Borders of Analytic Philosophy", in *Ratio*, 25(2) (2012), 167.

[2] Hannah Marije Altorf, "Iris Murdoch and Common Sense Or, What is it Like to be a Woman in Philosophy", in *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 87 (2020), 201–220.

[3] Justin Broackes, "Introduction", in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* ed. Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.

[4] Ved Mehta, *The Fly and the Fly-Bottle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 91.

an exegete of existentialist philosophy who had "read the big books" of existentialism—completely passing over the fact that she had penned multiple critical discussions of his own position in moral philosophy (universal prescriptivism).[5]

Times have changed since the early 2000s and Murdoch's philosophical writings are now read more widely by analytic philosophers. There is, however, something troubling about the way that her work is sometimes treated that suggests that she is still being held to the same standard that triggered the "where are the arguments" response from my former colleague. That is to say, there is sometimes the uncomfortable appearance that Murdoch is being saved from her own excesses; that sympathetic scholars are preventing responses like my colleague's by showing that beneath the "compelling pictures" and the awkward displays of ethical and political commitment, Murdoch's work contains *real arguments* (or at least fine materials for constructing them). There are two forms that this rehabilitation project has taken. The first concedes that Murdoch's writings are profoundly insightful but unclear; it attempts to extract her most insightful remarks and reassemble them in a form more palatable to analytic moral philosophers. The second insists that Murdoch's 'unclarity' is only apparent; if we look at her work in the right way—*synoptically*—we can see her using legitimate argumentative methods to defend a familiar sort of position.

The first of these two rehabilitation strategies is taken up by Kieran Setiya. He accounts for the limited influence Murdoch's work has had on analytic moral philosophy in terms of "difficulties internal to Murdoch's work." He writes:

> Her writing can be opaque, her views obscure. It is not easy to identify arguments, if she has them, or clear objections to opposing views … if Murdoch is to speak more audibly to contemporary philosophers, so that she cannot be ignored, her ideas must be reframed as interventions in existing disputes, her arguments must be recovered and her conclusions made clear.[6]

Setiya treats this problem by assembling Murdoch's insightful remarks into argumentative forms that speak to contemporary debates about what

[5] Mehta, *The Fly and the Fly-Bottle*, 51.

[6] Kieran Setiya, "Murdoch on the Sovereignty of Good", in *Philosopher's Imprint* 13(9) (2013), 1.

distinguishes two persons who seemingly share in their view of a situation and yet differ in their motivation to do the right thing. By distilling her "odd mix of empirical psychology, moral exhortation, and speculative metaphysics" into a theory of moral concepts and perception, Setiya offers a novel, Murdoch-inspired defense of internalism in a form that is "audible" to analytic moral philosophers.[7]

Jessy Jordan exemplifies the second tack. He reviews her corpus in its entirety and shows how segments of individual works contribute to a larger overall argument for a species of moral realism. In an early formulation of this, he traces a "three-act structure" across her career. The first act takes place during the 1950s; it is "deconstructive", comprised of genealogical arguments that establish an "Anti-Enlightenment narrative", intended lay bare "the deeply influential, widely pervasive, and uniquely problematic intellectual, spiritual, and moral shift that occurred in the modern period through a coordination of historical, social, and conceptual analysis".[8] Jordan's understanding of Murdoch's use of the history of philosophy is influenced by Charles Taylor, who claims that we need to recover the history of philosophical positions that have attained the status of unquestionable common sense. By doing so, we can recognize their contingency, seeing that these positions were formed at a particular moment in history and that we can reassess their credentials while also noticing that the position used to have live competition. We engage in recollection so that we might recover these alternative positions from the dustbin of history and restore the practices they once informed.[9] When Jordan describes Murdoch as a genealogist, he is picturing her as crafting "a historical narrative designed to subvert a dominant philosophical consensus, thereby liberating one to consider an alternative philosophical picture".[10] The other "acts" reconstruct on the grounds cleared by her genealogical deconstructions. In his later analysis of Murdoch's methods, Jordan claims that in the 1960s "second act" of her career, Murdoch introduces a rich set of phenomenological observations as she discusses Plato, attention, and the Good. These observations, when read in light of

[7] Setiya, "Murdoch on the Sovereignty of Good", 2.

[8] Jessy Jordan, *Iris Murdoch's Genealogy of the Modern Self: Retrieving Consciousness Beyond the Linguistic Turn* (PhD Dissertation: Baylor University, 2008).

[9] Charles Taylor, "Philosophy and its History", in *Philosophy in History: Essays in the Historiography of Philosophy* eds. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 22.

[10] Jordan, *Iris Murdoch's Genealogy of the Modern Self*, vii.

how she discusses the ontological argument in her "third act", contribute to a transcendental argument for the necessity of the good to human cognition.[11] On this reading, we should understand Murdoch's earliest forays in academic philosophy as preambles to a defense of moral realism.

We have then two ways of responding to the "where are the arguments" question. Either there are none (but there are ample materials that can be used to construct one), or there is one (but it doesn't fully reside in any one paper, which contain only sub-arguments). I have no serious objection to philosophers treating Murdoch's work as a repository of insight and source of inspiration as they participate in contemporary debates about internalism, particularism, realism, and the like (although this should always be done cautiously). Speaking about her 1950s contemporaries, Murdoch herself warns, "There has been of late something of a tendency to read back into the great metaphysicians our own logical formulae, and to treat them as if they were trying ineptly to do what we have done successfully."[12] While Murdoch would probably reject the label "great metaphysician", the issue she flags here is clearly relevant. By taking a particular image of philosophical clarity and rigour for granted, we're left with the appearance that Murdoch tried and failed to live up to that standard. It elides the fact that these ideals are open to contestation and reinterpretation, and that Murdoch might be fruitfully read as exemplifying an alternative conception of the aims and methods proper to philosophical exploration. Rather than bemoaning that Murdoch crosses the lines between persuasion and argument, between literature and philosophy, and between moral philosophy and moralizing, we might try to see how the apparently problematic aspects of her writing come together into a vision of philosophy that questions how these lines are typically drawn.

The synoptic approach avoids accusing Murdoch of obscurity, but ultimately suffers from the same problem as the first. That is to say, Jordan presents Murdoch's work as perfectly rigorous, defending a form of moral realism through genealogical and transcendental arguments; however, by zooming out and adopting the synoptic view, he elides the very aspects of her writing that lead philosophers to accuse her of excessive literariness or *moralizing*. Her works may be replete with metaphors, analogies, and

[11] Jessy Jordan, "On the Transcendental Structure of Iris Murdoch's Philosophical Method", in *European Journal of Philosophy* 30(1) (2022), 394–410.

[12] Iris Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics", in *Existentialists and Mystics* ed. Peter Conradi (New York: Penguin, 1998), 73.

compelling pictures, and she may draw regular linkages between philosophy and the ills of post-war literature and politics, but the synoptic view makes these aspects of her writing look like stylistic quirks, at best ancillary to her more fundamental philosophical aim: displaying the universal (moral) structure of human consciousness. It may even be that they detract from the project that Jordan identifies at the synoptic level; commentary on this topic is outside the scope of his exegetical project.[13]

Giving Murdoch's use of literary language the window-dressing treatment should strike us as peculiar, given how she characterizes the activity of moral philosophy. It is, in her words, a practice of analysing and describing our own morality and that of others that involves "the making of models and pictures of what different kinds of men are like", often by making poetic use of language.[14] Philosophers don't incidentally work with imagery—picture-making is a central activity, albeit one that philosophers sometimes engage in without fully understanding what they are doing. In her early manuscript on Sartre's fiction and philosophy, she notes that it is replete with deeply imagistic depictions of the "human condition" that succeed only in representing the preoccupations of a particular sort of Sartrean psychology: persons with especially metaphysical temperaments who worry about the imperfect fit between abstract concepts and the flux and ambiguity of concrete existence, with how dissimilar the contingent occurrence of events is from the necessity of the succession of notes defined by a song. This is only one possible response; for Gabriel Marcel, the same messiness and overabundance appears glorious rather than nauseating. There's nonetheless something worthwhile in representing the structure of one perspective from among a diversity of outlooks.[15] On Murdoch's view, Sartre's imagery-laden writing—replete with metaphors of the "viscous, the fluid, the paste-like"—make this way of being human and relating to a world available to his readers. What we do when we engage in metaphysical reflection is to develop tools for self-interpretation that make use of "concepts, images, explanatory schema, and metaphors to describe reality and human existence". As Maria

[13] Tony Milligan also cautions against treating Murdoch's literariness as something that can be separated from what she is doing as a philosopher, arguing that the metaphors she employs are not incidental and cannot be elided or translated into more literal language without altering her meaning. See Tony Milligan, "Iris Murdoch and the Borders of Analytic Philosophy", in *Ratio* 25(2) (2012), 164–176.

[14] Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics", 74.

[15] Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987), 49.

Antonaccio puts it, "In her view, metaphysics is not (as some analytic philosophers would hold) a logically neutral attempt to explain the nature of reality, but a 'figurative' activity of creating myths, concepts, and images to describe and illuminate human moral existence."[16]

Furthermore, this activity cannot always be separated from moralizing and persuasion. Murdoch warns us that the attempt to explain our own morality and others' is likely to produce pictures that are "half a description and half a persuasion". We are not just persuaded to go on to affirm a set of would-be facts when we engage with these self-portraits—we are persuaded to *become* something. Murdoch writes, "man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and them comes to resemble the picture".[17] While it is not clear what kind of mechanism is operative in this process of coming-to-resemble, it suggests that the picture-making disciplines (of which philosophy seems to be one) have the power to influence our wider culture. Murdoch does not think that the picture of human freedom (as unconstrained choice), world (as a realm of neutral empirical facts), and morality (as responsible self-determination) that dominated post-war philosophy were practically *inert*; they "crystallised"—strengthened and organized—more diffuse cultural attitudes into influential self-understandings.[18] As Silvia Caprioglio Panizza puts it, "our background ideas about what is the case, what is real, the structure of reality and self, are not just idle abstractions—and when they are, they are either postures, or not applicable to everyday life—but inform everything we think and do, inseparably from moral sensibility, thought, and action."[19] There is an internal relationship between metaphysical ideas and the nuts and bolts of how we live our lives.[20]

Taking Murdoch seriously as a maker of metaphysical pictures might mean taking her seriously as a kind of moralizer who participated in the complex processes whereby human beings come to resemble this or that image of themselves. When Nora Hämäläinen reflects on Murdoch's use of poetic language, she highlights the role that such images play in helping us to develop into better people. When teaching students to become better singers, instructors will sometimes present them with metaphorical

[16] Maria Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 22.
[17] Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics", 75.
[18] Iris Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited", in *Existentialists and Mystics* ed. Peter Conradi (New York: Penguin, 1998), 270.
[19] Silvia Caprioglio Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 63.
[20] Murdoch, "Metaphysics and Ethics", 74–75.

descriptions of the body and the movement of air; we don't relate to our breathing as a process of activating this or that collection of muscles within ourselves and guidance in those terms would not be helpful to trainee singers. Instructors will sometimes tell their students to picture their torsos as hollow barrels they must completely fill with air or to imagine the stream of air they breathe out as they sing as a washing line, smooth and even until they come to clothespin-consonants that demand sharp articulation.[21] When Murdoch offers us imagistic descriptions of metaphysical phenomena, we might think of it along these lines: as part of the training of our moral capacities. Following Plato, she seeks to craft "an imaginary of human development in knowledge and virtue".[22] Murdoch's use of imagery was not, on Hämäläinen's view, accidental or ancillary to what she was attempting to do in her writings. Metaphysical pictures don't just describe us; for better or for worse, they guide us.

There is a tension between this interpretation of Murdoch and the synoptic, transcendental reading. According to Jordan, the aim of a transcendental argument is to show us that what philosophers treat as dubious is in fact necessary to what thought and experience are for us. Murdoch does not establish how things are in some mind-independent reality; rather, her career culminates in the claim that the concept of the Good is presupposed in human cognition as such and cannot be seriously doubted. "Good is something necessary to human experience, thought, and belief (e.g., it cannot be thought away), not that there is a mind-independent reality in some Platonic 'elsewhere', similar to the Christian 'elsewhere'".[23] Doubts about the reality of value are akin to doubts about the existence of an external material world or causal relations. The activity of moral thinking—thinking as if there were real worldly structures of better and worse, of important and unimportant, of good and bad—is ubiquitous and inescapable. It is immutable in human life as such insofar as human beings think at all. What a philosopher does in bringing this to our attention cannot affect its status as a structure of consciousness. If her work offers practical guidance, it looks like it's guidance away from anti-realist theories of value.

[21] Nora Hämäläinen, "What is a Wittgensteinian Neo-Platonist? – Iris Murdoch, Metaphysics and Metaphor", in *Philosophical Papers* 43(2) (2014), 222.

[22] Hämäläinen, "What is a Wittgensteinian Neo-Platonist", 223.

[23] Jordan, "On the Transcendental Structure of Iris Murdoch's Philosophical Method", 404.

The transcendental reading *may* be true to aspects of Murdoch's later thought—this is a question I will return to at the close of this book—but it misses something of the content and mood of her early writings which are preoccupied by troubling historical changes and the mutability of particular human practices. Content-wise, Murdoch's 1950s writings cover a number of topics that are much more particular than, and not clearly concerned with, the necessarily value-laden structure of human consciousness. In "Thinking and Language" and "Nostalgia for the Particular", she engages with Wittgenstein and Gilbert Ryle's "behaviouristic" analyses of mental concepts like "thought" and "inner experience". Papers like "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited" and "Against Dryness" discuss trends in twentieth-century literature, literary criticism, and aesthetics and describe what she takes to be the *moral* virtues of great novelists and playwrights of past centuries and the shortcomings of formalistic criteria of aesthetic value. One of her least discussed papers, "A House of Theory", identifies connections between the rise of an anti-metaphysical and scientistic empiricism and the decline of socialism in post-war Britain.

These papers centre on very specific practices—the depiction of human beings in prose fiction, the production of socialist pamphlets—which don't share in the supposed immutability of evaluative consciousness as such. We might necessarily occupy worlds of value, but we do not necessarily regard other human beings as worthy of our interest and tolerance as the messy, eccentric, and inexhaustibly particular individuals that they are. Murdoch certainly did not think that twentieth-century novelists wrote their characters as if they were valuable in this way. It may be a mistake to claim that human beings are or could be simply in touch with a world of evaluatively neutral empirical facts to which moral tags are later applied, but we do not necessarily think our understanding of the world would be enhanced by developing a richer vocabulary of evaluative political concepts. Murdoch lamented that post-war socialist writers did not concern themselves with that sort of concept. Even if Jordan is right to think that, for Murdoch, no philosophical position can alter the evaluative structure of human consciousness, she believed that particular moral activities are mutable and *had* withered in the post-war period. In her early writings, Murdoch is preoccupied by the decline of the socialist imagination and of modern literature.

By abandoning the synoptic view, we can zoom in on Murdoch's St. Anne's writings and appreciate aspects of her approach to philosophy that have thus far been obscured by focusing only on the role they play in

laying the groundwork for her later writings. We can closely examine how she employed literary language in this work with an eye to seeing the contribution it made to her more localized projects, rather than treating it as mere window-dressing. We can notice the particularities of the literary, moral, and political practices that she discusses, rather than subsuming them under the general heading of Good-presupposing consciousness; and we can make sense of how what and how she wrote was connected to her post-war political and cultural obsessions. Doing so, we will be able to see what she did in her early career as an attempt to exploit the advantages her unique talents and perspective as a philosopher: the fact that she had a mind on the borders of philosophy, literature, and politics.

From the earliest days of her professional career as a philosopher, Murdoch was alive to the dangers that her path would be fraught with. She worried about whether she would be able to rise to the occasion. In a letter penned while she was a Sarah Smithson fellow at Newnham College, Cambridge in 1947, she confided the following: "The question is, can I really exploit the advantages (instead of as hitherto simply suffer from the disadvantages) of having a mind on the borders of philosophy, literature, and politics—all bloody doubtful."[24] Neither the synoptic nor the salvaging approaches to Murdoch's work enable us to see this as a central problematic animating her early forays into philosophy. A first step to remedying this is to reflect on the context in which she wrote that letter and who she was when she wrote it: respectively, the postwar ascendance of 'clarificatory' or 'linguistic' philosophy in Britain, and a young philosopher educated during a unique moment in history. Murdoch's philosophical education took place at Somerville College from 1939 to 1942 at a time when British philosophy was especially heterogenous and questions about the nature of philosophical clarity, the public role of the philosopher, and the methods proper to these aims received diverse answers. By telling the story of Murdoch's intellectual development in a way that incorporates both the dissident British philosophers she learned from before and during the war, the existentialist philosophers who inspired her after it, and the changing disciplinary norms that attended the postwar period, we can see her early writings in a new light. They were neither an insightful exercise in obscurantism nor reducible to a small piece in the development of

[24] Iris Murdoch, Letter to Raymond Queneau, 17 October 1947, in *Living on Paper: Letters from Iris Murdoch 1934–1995* eds. Avril Horner and Anne Rowe (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 67.

a career-spanning defense of moral realism. Murdoch's early career produced a self-contained, rigorous, and clear set of papers that spoke both to live questions in the philosophy of mind, aesthetics, and moral philosophy *and* to a live question about the practice of philosophy itself. To see this, we must avoid taking the meaning of concepts like 'clarity' for granted.

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