

Browning, Gary. *Iris Murdoch and the Political*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2024 vi + 221 pp.

Iris Murdoch begins ‘On God and Good’ with a characteristically ambitious claim: “We need”, she writes, “a moral philosophy which can speak significantly of Freud and Marx, and out of which aesthetic and political views can be generated. We need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central” (Murdoch 1970/2014, p. 45). That she was interested in Freud, love and aesthetics is very evident from her work, and thus far much of the engagement with her has indeed focused on the ego, loving attention and aesthetic themes. That she also thought of Marx as philosophically central and that political views are implicit in her writing tends to go unremarked on in the secondary literature – and is far less obvious. Moreover, insofar as politics has been remarked on in relation to Murdoch, it has largely been to note her relative *lack* of interest in it rather than to explore that interest.

This book aims to make good that imbalance, focusing squarely on ‘the political’ in Murdoch’s life and work. Gary Browning argues that Murdoch’s early desire to explore politics alongside philosophy and literature “is realized in her subsequent writings” (4). Murdoch, he argues, is a profoundly political thinker. Not only are there clear political dimensions to her literary and philosophical work, but she is ultimately “a political theorist of note” (173).

To argue for this, *Iris Murdoch and the Political* weaves together discussions of Murdoch’s personal interest in politics (as evinced, for example, by her journals, personal letters and so on), the political dimensions to her literary work (including plays and poetry as well as novels) and her explicitly political philosophical writing. What emerges is less a portrait of her as a writer or philosopher in particular, and more a broad portrait of her as a human being.

Chapter one begins to set the scene by noting the many places (such as the above-mentioned comment about Marx) where Murdoch seems to describe her work as having a crucial political dimension. Chapters two and three focus largely on the personal, charting her early interest in radical left-wing politics and then her move away from this in later life. Chapter two discusses her early enthusiastic engagement with communism (an engagement both theoretical and practical, as she may have spied for the Soviet Union during the war) and her longer engagement with socialism. It also includes discussion of some political essays, such as ‘The Moral Decision About Homosexuality’ (which called for the legalization of homosexuality) and ‘A House of Theory’ (which highlighted some deficiencies of contemporary British socialism and pointed to some possible directions forward). Chapter three describes how Murdoch came to see a real divide

between the public and the private realms, between politics and morality, partly motivated by concern about the Soviet Union's oppression in eastern Europe.

Chapters four to seven turn to some more specific political themes in her writing. Chapter four examines political themes in her plays, outlining those lesser-known works and how they exemplify political concerns such as questions about political power and idealism, and tensions between individuals and political goals. Chapter five explores themes of socialism, community and utopian politics in her thinking, primarily in relation to the novels (for example, the ultimately unsuccessful utopian cooperative community at Imber Court in *The Bell*). Chapter six focuses on 'Migrants, the Displaced, Refugees, and the Holocaust'. Again, this focuses primarily on the novels, discussing the many characters in her novels who fall into one of these categories, and suggesting that her early work with the UNRRA at a refugee camp shaped this concern. Finally, chapter seven focuses on issues relating to 'Sex, Sexuality, Gender and Feminism'. Browning here suggests that despite Murdoch's rather 'disconcerting' dismissive rhetoric when discussing such questions (149), she is in fact an astute social critic and that her novels "offer a distinct contribution to feminism" (147). She does this, he suggests, by providing realistic depictions of gendered power relations, as well as sympathetic depictions of non-heterosexual characters.

By weaving together Murdoch's personal interest in politics with points where political themes are exemplified in her literature, and with explicit discussions of political issues in her philosophy, this book provides a good overview of the full range of Murdoch's thinking about politics. It gives the reader a good sense of her (changing) political ideas and sympathies, and of the ways in which her explicit philosophical views relate to and find expression in her literary work.

However, this very same interweaving also seems to obscure rather significant distinctions between the following claims: (a) Murdoch is 'personally political' (shaped by politics or interested in politics); (b) there are interesting political dimensions to Murdoch's literary writing; (c) Murdoch is a political theorist. (a) is undoubtedly true, but not, I think, particularly interesting or surprising; by this measure vanishingly few people would not be 'political'. Perhaps we all are 'political theorists' of a kind, since we all have views about society and value, but to claim that Murdoch is a political theorist in the same sense in which every or almost every other human is would not seem worthy of book-length discussion. Similarly, (b) seems relatively uncontentious: after all, how could novels about human communities *avoid* having political dimensions? It seems almost inevitable that anyone as prolific in their literary work as Murdoch would have writing with some political dimensions. That said, though perhaps unsurprising, it is nonetheless certainly interesting to have these dimensions spelled out. It is with (c), however, the claim that Murdoch is well thought

of as a *political theorist*, that we come to Browning's most substantive and contentious claim, and the claim that would answer those who criticise Murdoch as apolitical.

Unfortunately, it is regarding this claim that the book seems to be on rather shaky ground. Murdoch has one excellent essay from the 50s, 'A House of Theory'. That essay is, I think, a really wonderful piece of political thought, and rather underappreciated within her oeuvre. But calling for the *construction* of a 'house of theory', a renewal of creative socialist thought that allows for new political possibilities, is not the same as undertaking the hard labour of actually constructing such an edifice. And that task is not really taken up in any of her future work. Of course, she does at various points make interesting remarks about politics, and she does have discussions of some specific political questions. But she does not seem to spell out anything like a systematic view of politics, or a distinctive account of some key political ideas and how they might fit together (or indeed stand in tension). Politics is rarely the main focus of her attention, and her views on it end up being largely reconstructed from discussions where some other subject matter is central. Moreover, the key political ideas that Browning identifies and highlights in her work (such as the divide she comes to see between the political and moral) are often fairly commonplace views that lack the creativity and vitality of her work elsewhere. In the end, that seems a rather thin basis on which to stake her claim to be a political theorist, let alone a notable one.

To take a specific example, consider Browning's claim that Murdoch's novels "offer a distinct contribution to feminism" (147). If the thought here is that in her novels she is interested in power, and particularly in gendered power dynamics, it seems true – and this aspect of her writing is perhaps somewhat overlooked. But does she really offer something distinctive for feminist thinking, something important and unique? That would be a very bold claim, and little is done here to defend it. Even granting the thought that her depictions of gendered power dynamics are realistic, one might well doubt that this is a 'distinct contribution to feminism', in that it may offer no more than is found in many other novels, and in a less fully filled-out way than some more consciously feminist literature.

To conclude, this book will be of interest to anyone interested in Murdoch's philosophy, novels, or biography. It provides a helpful overview of her political thinking, the nature of her interest in radical left-wing politics, and the reasons why she drifted away from that over time. Although it may not fulfil the promise of demonstrating her to be a notable political theorist, there is nonetheless much here to enrich our understanding of Murdoch.

Reference

Murdoch, Iris, *The Sovereignty of Good* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1970/2014)