

# Moral, Good and Art in Iris Murdoch's Thought

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## Abstract

The moral philosophy of Murdoch presents an important challenge to current ethical inquiry: the effort to reclaim a notion of the self as individual and to reconceive its relation to an idea of moral value or the good. Murdoch believes "the self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion. Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness." According to Murdoch, moral philosophy at the first should provide an accurate picture of man and show how, man may improve morally. In *The Sovereignty of Good* Murdoch refers to some techniques of unselfing. This paper aims to show in brief that how good effects moral change and how art provides an occasion for unselfing. It will be shown that how some characters in her novels become far from their self and close to the reality.

**Keywords:** Art, Goodness, reality, morals, self, unselfing, change, value, vision, imagination, individual, Existentialism

## Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to show Murdoch's philosophy of good, moral and art. Iris Murdoch is one of the prominent mid-twentieth century novelists as well as a notable philosopher. Her effective writing career stretches from 1945 to 1994. She was born in Dublin in 1919 of Anglo-Irish parents. Wills John Hughes Murdoch, Iris's father was a civil servant who had been a cavalry officer in the First World War. Iris Murdoch describes him as a really good man. As she says, he was a great inspiration

to her and the greatest literary influence as well as moral one in her life. Her mother, Irene Richardson gave up a career as a singer to marry at eighteen. They moved to London in Murdoch's first year.

Iris Murdoch was more than simply a kindly novelist urging us to be good. She was an exceptionally creative and morally passionate thinker who witnessed some of the devastating horrors of the twentieth century and was trained in some of its dominant philosophies – and yet never ceased defending the always unfashionable notion of goodness.

Her philosophical books like *The Sovereignty Of Good* (1970), *The Fire And The Sun: Why Plato Banned The Artists* (1976) and *Metaphysics As A Guide To Morals* (1992) have been important to theologians and moral philosophers.

There are some books on Murdoch's philosophical works and novels. Peter J. Conradi's *Iris Murdoch The Saint and The Artist* for instance has dealt with some of her novels and its aim is to illuminate Murdoch's best work and to give some account of why she is found both entertaining, and also serious and important. One of the best books on Murdoch is *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch* by Maria Antonaccio which is about her ideas and philosophies. Elizabeth Dipple's *Work for the Spirit* also sought to bridge the gap of Murdoch's advocates and her detractors. There are also other essays and books which argue about her novels. This study however deals with her philosophy of Good, Morals and Art, and Its evolution in Murdoch's works.

## Murdoch's thought of Moral, Good and Art

Murdoch was educated at the Froebel Educational Institute, at Badminton College, then at Somer-

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ville College, Oxford, where she read 'Greats' (ancient history, classics, philosophy). From 1942 to 1944 she worked as temporary wartime civil servant (Assistant Principal) in the treasury, and then for the following two years with the United Nations Relief in Belgium and Rehabilitation Administration, in Austria, where she worked in a camp for displaced persons. (Conradi, 1986, p.10). There she had witnessed 'the devastating effects of the totalitarian political forces of the twentieth century on human lives.' (Antonaccio, 2003, p. 5). As Conradi points out 'the phenomenological and moral bias of the existentialists excited her' (Conradi, 1986, p. 11) but 'She came to distrust Sartrean existentialism and British philosophy equally, and to see them as sharing a common ground in offering no barrier to romantic self-assertion' (ibid, p. 12). By 1957 in a Spectator review she noted that

'the appeal of existentialism was its dramatic, solipsistic, romantic and anti-social exaltation of the individual' (ibid) She has argued that 'both French existentialism and English linguistic philosophy are heirs of Romanticism and share a common voluntarism, a romantic over-emphasis on the will' (ibid, p. 17, 18)

Murdoch in her analysis of twentieth-century literature 'classifies the novel into two types that form a pair analogous to the descriptive contrast between neurosis and convention: the first type she calls "crystalline", the second "journalistic".' (Antonaccio, 2003, p. 108) According to Murdoch both types 'fall short of what she judges to be the standard for the portrayal of individual character in literature...' (ibid)

Murdoch believes that the most important thing that the art of novel can reveal to its readers 'is that other people exist' (Murdoch, 1959, p. 267). She believes this is what was missing from the novels of her time. Unlike these two types of novels, the nineteenth-century novel was concerned with real various individuals struggling in society (Antonaccio, 2003, p. 109).

With her first degree she got a post in Cambridge for a year and then in Oxford, where she taught philosophy from 1948 to 1963. There was a brief period teaching philosophy at the Royal College of Art in the 1963-67. She married John Bayley, a Professor of English in 1956. Their marriage was a mutually most fruitful association.

Murdoch insisted that her philosophy did not intrude on her fiction and that her characters should

not be considered 'mouthpieces' for her own philosophical views. However she finds an important point of connection between philosophy and literature. She explains that since both, philosophy and literature are cognitive activities of the human mind they are saturated in the moral domain. She says that though they are so different, both are truth-seeking and truth-revealing activities.

Murdoch's philosophical thought proposes that no ethical tradition has ever adequately fashioned a picture of human beings as they truly are. In her philosophical works and novels what she sought was to illustrate a personal vision of man's morality. Therefore her moral philosophy is an 'effort to reclaim a notion of the self as individual and to reconceive its relation to an idea of moral value or the good.' (ibid, p. 3)

She had observed the rise of Symbolist trends in modern poetry and literature, which seemed to question the importance of the portrayal of character in literature. In the face of this powerful cultural idea that believed only the whole is real Murdoch insisted that the particular and individual are paradigmatic of the real. She notes that, contrary to Kant's belief, rational men have different natures and see the world with radical differences: 'we can no longer even imagine that all reflective men have common purposes and common values' (Murdoch, 1959, p. 33).

In Murdoch's view moral philosophy at the first should provide an accurate picture of man and show how, man may improve morally. She believes that contemporary philosophy fails to provide a realistic account of what human nature is, and Existentialism offers a superficial optimism and the consoling romantic image of man. She says:

'We have suffered a general loss of concepts, the loss of moral and political vocabulary. We no longer see man against a background of values, of realities, which transcend him.' (Murdoch, 1983, p. 46)

In her novels Murdoch depicts her characters in realistic ways and shows how they do their pilgrimage from the illusions towards reality.

In Murdoch's view moral concepts are not merely a function of what an agent chooses to regard as valuable; they are more deeply, a function of the agent's moral being, the texture of his or her personal vision or consciousness. Morality is bound up with our deepest conceptual attitudes and sensibilities about the world, which determine the facts from

the very beginning (Antonaccio, 2003, p. 38). As she says: 'We differ not only because we select different objects out of the same world, but because we see different worlds' (Murdoch, 1956, p. 41). Moral concepts in fact are the way of apprehending the facts rooted in moral vision. In her novels some characters at the first have no the true vision of themselves as well as of their surroundings. As Murdoch believes, anything that alters vision in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue. In her novels Murdoch shows some of the techniques which help the characters to go out of themselves such as the apprehension of beauty in nature and art and most important, attention to others. Murdoch says: 'Self is such a dazzling object, that if one looks there one may see nothing else' (Murdoch, 1970, p. 31). Therefore, the purification of consciousness requires finding objects of attention that redirect vision and psychic energy away from the self. Dora's experience at the National Gallery in Murdoch's novel, *The Bell* is the best example of the fact. There, she had a kind of revelation about the nature of reality.

She marvelled, with a kind of gratitude, that they [the pictures] were all still here, and her heart was filled with love for the pictures, their authority, their marvellous generosity, their splendour. It occurred to her that here at last was something real and something perfect. Who had said that, about perfection and reality being in the same place? Here was something which her consciousness could not wretchedly devour, and by making it part of her fantasy make it worthless. Even Paul, she thought, only existed now as someone she dreamed about; or else as a vague and external menace never fully encountered or understood. But the pictures were something real outside herself, which spoke to her kindly yet in sovereign tones, something superior and good whose presence destroyed the dreary, trance-like solipsism of her earlier mood. When the world had seemed to be subjective, it had seemed to be without interest or value. But now there was something else in it after all.... She gave a last look at the painting, still smiling, as one might smile in a temple, favoured, encouraged, and loved. (Murdoch, 1958, pp. 203-204)

Dora's experience shows that the most satisfactory feeling of existence comes from an attention to something external to oneself; her finding reality in art confirms Michael's belief (other character of

the same novel), that each individual perceives reality in his own way. The reference in the passage to love and religion are reminders of other ways of apprehending an external reality. Dora, like most individuals, finds art a satisfying means of experiencing reality because in art particulars are shaped into an aesthetic whole, a perfection of form, which satisfies man's desire for a total order.

On the existentialist-behaviorist view the agent is identified with the 'empty choosing will' (Murdoch, 1970, p. 35) and morality is defined as action, movement and conduct rather than vision. (Antonaccio, 2003, p. 38) They believe there is no moral vision. 'There is only the ordinary world which is seen with ordinary vision, and there is the will that moves within it.' (Murdoch, 1970, p. 35) But in Murdoch's view the background to our choice is vision and imagination. She says:

We are moving through a continuum within which we are aware of truth and falsehood, illusion and reality, good and evil. We are continuously striving and learning, discovering and discarding images. (Murdoch, 1992, p. 250)

Jake, the central character in *Under the Net*, is true of this idea. He is Sartrean in the sense that he moves through a society, unreal and alien without the consolation of a rational universe. The virtue of this figure lies in understanding his own contingency and not in the contingency of the world. (Panwar, p.5) Sartre's hero agonizes and contemplates in a lucidly tortured solitude. But, Jake unlike Sartrean heroes finally is led to seek true goodness through gradual apprehension of goodness in his surroundings. Jake sees the realities and changes. He tries an internal monologue but discovers that the world is full of other people whose views, though he has misinterpreted, yet can learn. She ends the novel with Jake's experiencing that *thauma* (wonder) that impels men to philosophise or create<sup>47</sup>. The end of the novel asserts that the world is most apprehensible at those moments when we are calmest about submitting to its inexhaustibility.

Murdoch uses the Platonic imagery of the good as the light of the sun by which we see all other things. She describes the good as the sun 'as the light which makes knowledge possible and the source of the light itself' (Antonaccio, 2003, p. 52) By this description of the good as a sun we can consider two aspects for the good; the transcendental aspect as well as the good as ideal standard of perfection. The transcendental aspect of the good emphasizes the internal relation of the good to human

life ('all our life proves it'); whereas the good as ideal standard emphasizes the objectivity of the good, its distance from the desire and will of the agent ('it's terribly distant, farther than any star'). As Murdoch says the good is both 'the closest thing... And the farthest thing' (Murdoch, 1988, p.107-108) which shines 'from outside and also it emerges from deep inside of the soul' (ibid, p.110). Human life is stretched between these two poles. Therefore it functions transcendently and also guides the direction of our knowledge (Antonaccio, 2003, p. 52-57). In her novel, the characters are depicted between the degrees of the good. And it is only the good that has corrected their consoling fantasies and their selfish illusions by right vision.

According to Murdoch human beings are by nature selfish and sunk in realities distorted by their fantasies. In *The Bell*, Michael with his romantic imagination of himself, searches for signs in events; for example, when the Abbess mentions a lay religious community, he reads into her suggestion a divine summons. Michael's image of himself as one favoured by God shapes his moral life and, occasionally, his relationships with people; it leads to spiritual pride and to a facile optimism about the consequences of his actions because he believes that 'God would not ultimately let him suffer shipwreck' (Murdoch, 1958, p. 177)

In *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, Murdoch depicts the selfishness by the portrayal of Rupert and Morgan and contends that each will chivalrously imagine that he protects and elevates the other! Thus chivalry and vanity will lead them deeper in (Murdoch, 1970, p. 224).

As Antonaccio says that the good requires a transformation of the self through the purification of psychic eros, which is the motive force of human moral being (Antonaccio, 2003, p. 15). She adds on this account

'...the idea of the good represents an idea of perfected (i.e., realistic or illusionless) knowledge that is paradigmatically expressed in the apprehension of the reality of other persons. Because human beings are riddled by distorted loves and consoling fantasies, the good in this sense is a "reality principle" that corrects selfish illusion by right vision' (ibid)

Murdoch believes that consciousness is fundamentally oriented towards the good as its ideal. It discriminates among levels of goodness as it carries out its evaluative activity; it is led to seek true goodness through gradual apprehension of shadows or

lesser degrees of goodness in its surroundings (ibid, p. 128). She says: 'We are always in motion toward or away from what is more real' (Murdoch, 1992, p. 295). Her novels have variety of characters which are in different light of the good. By attention to the reality of the world and other persons they move away from their own fantasies and towards reality. By attention to the nature, art, painting, love and religion they go far from their self and close to the reality. In Murdoch's novels some characters discover that painting can startle them out of their self-obsession and give them understanding of reality that they can remove from their personal needs and desires. In *Nuns and Soldiers*, art is one of the main ways of endowing our lives with value. In the novel *Tim* has a classic experience of the numinous. He has no religious beliefs but when he is confronted by a great rock face, he feels dread, exhilaration and joy. After that he had pure, clean, blessed feeling. Immediately, he begins to paint and produces his first serious work. There is something about the rock that shocks him. It makes him aware of a dimension beyond himself.

## Conclusions

The fact that Murdoch was a professor of philosophy at Oxford and also wrote novels makes it but logical to regard her as a philosophical novelist. And the moment one does so it is further very tempting to put her beside other twentieth century philosophical novelists especially the Existentialists like Sartre, Camus, and Kafka. But the temptation must be resisted for she, both as a philosopher and a novelist, differs a great deal from them. The impression one gathers after reading the novels of those eminent Europeans, especially the French ones, is that they seem to be tailor-made affairs to suit their respective philosophies. In other words, the novels like *The Fall*, *Iron in the Soul* by Sartre and Camus' *The Outsider* and *The Plague* are but illustrations of their ideas advocated in their philosophical books like *Being and Nothingness* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* respectively. Kafka, of course, wrote no philosophical treatise and hence his philosophical vision comes to us only through his novels like *The Trial*, and *The Castle* and short stories like *Metamorphosis* and *The Penal Colony*. And, to that extent, Murdoch comes close to him in that her moral vision, too, emerges out of her novels which are not, by any means, mere exemplifications of her ideas expressed in her philosophical books.

Iris Murdoch, as a philosopher, does not share the dark, nihilist vision of those Existentialist writers. This is not to say that hers is a fair-weather philosophy; indeed, she is painfully aware of the Void lying at the core of the human situation, as her novels like *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* show. But she, unlike Sartre, Camus, and Kafka, does not regard the situation to be irremediable. For her, man's capacity to love, to be good and to phantasize is a saving grace. This love is born out of caring for and 'attention to others', a phrase that Murdoch borrowed from Simone Weil.

In her awareness that the complexity of the human mind defies any philosophy or morality no matter how neatly worked out and in her advocacy of love, good and attention to others as the antidote to the existentialist angst, Murdoch comes very close to writers like D. H. Lawrence, who also saw love and goodness as the ways of redemption for man. For Murdoch love, art and goodness are opportunities for man to go out of himself — 'unselfing' as Murdoch calls it — and worship the 'holy otherness' of consorts, as Lawrence calls it. In *Nuns and Soldiers* Anne, for instance finds her way-out in love and charity. And *The Green Knight* shows how Sefton and Harvey regard their union as a sacrament and as a means of transforming each other into 'divine beings'. (Murdoch, 1994, p. 390)

Peter conradi says that Taine remarked of Dickens that his whole work might be reduced to the phrase "Be good, and love". So might Murdoch's oeuvre (Conradi, 1986, p. 9).

Murdoch regards the good as a 'pure moral source' that lies outside consciousness, yet works through the energies of consciousness to effect moral change from within. She says: 'Moral progress (freedom, justice, love, truth) leads us to a new state of being. This higher state does not involve the ending but rather the transformation of the ordinary person and the world' (Murdoch, 1992, p.190).

If one takes a look at the total novelistic output of her, one becomes aware of something Shakespearean about it. She was always fascinated by the Shakespearean theatre which, for her, was not a place of mere vicarious wish-fulfillment but one peopled with real persons with real problems in a real world. It was as if not only was the world a stage for the poet but even his stage was a world full of real and memorable characters. Murdoch's ambition was to write a 'Shakespearean novel' in which readers would find a similar degree of realism. (Cited by Chakoo, *The Tribune*, 1999). Whether her

novels ever achieved that Shakespearean greatness may be a matter of opinion but the evolution of her moral vision does show Shakespearean pattern. Her first novel, *Under the Net*, is preoccupied with language as a means of exploring reality and reveals in verbal play as do the early romantic comedies Shakespeare. This is followed by the dark period denoted by *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* where Julius through his Iago-like machinations exposes the fragility and vulnerability of all human relationships. But the later novels like *Nuns and Soldiers* and *The Green Knight* assert love's redemptive power over the evil and void represented by Julius. If Shakespeare's last plays are romances, Murdoch returns to the Arthurian romances in *The Green Knight*.

In novelistic craft also Murdoch's genius flowered as she went from novel to novel. Indeed, her later novels function like Shakespeare's dark comedies and romances. They give a more comprehensive picture of life bringing out both its pathos and its dignity, both its 'horror and glory' as T. S. Eliot would say. It is a critical commonplace to say that a writer is known by the characters he creates. This is certainly true of English writers from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Jane Austen and Dickens each one with his/her own character gallery. Murdoch always wanted to be a part of that realist tradition of writers. And yet she was acutely conscious of their almost unattainable artistic greatness. Once again she frankly admits, in her letter to B. L. Chakoo, that her novels fall far short of the achievements of her predecessors and are 'much less than the great novels of the nineteenth century... We're pygmies compared with those great writers like Dostoevsky and Tolstoy and Dickens and Jane Austen.' (Ibid)

And do we not say that one is really great precisely when one realizes this 'pigmy' stature of one's own?

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