

## MURDOCH AND POLITICS

Politics broadly construed was important to Murdoch throughout her life. In a letter to her friend Raymond Queneau in 1947, she characterizes her own thought as working on the borders of politics, philosophy and literature (Horner and Rowe 2015: 99). She had been introduced to progressive and internationalist views at her secondary school, and joined the British Communist Party upon entering Oxford in 1938. She remained an active member throughout her undergraduate years, and was a clandestine member during the following three years in wartime government work at the Treasury (including copying and passing government documents to the BCP [Conradi 2001: 145]). She broke with or at least drifted away from the BCP around 1946 but remained on the left, and a Labour Party supporter, through the next three decades.<sup>1</sup> After that, she became increasingly conservative and seemed to have remained a Tory for the remainder of her life. She was particularly opposed to the Labour Party's embrace in the 1960's of comprehensive schools and its rejection of the existing public educational system that sorted children, based on an exam taken at age eleven, into academically-oriented "grammar schools" and vocationally-oriented "secondary modern" schools.

Nevertheless, politics never became a major focus of Murdoch's philosophical work that she anticipated in 1947. However, political concerns do make their way into her philosophical work in several essays, and then in an important chapter in *Metaphysics*. In addition she wrote several popular essays on political topics, and expressed political concerns of different types in many of her novels. I will discuss her 1958 socialist essay, her political philosophy in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, her complex take on Marxism, and then, briefly, her thinking about sexual orientation and race.

### *Murdoch's socialist essay: "A House of Theory"*

#### The socialist movement and the critique of capitalism

Murdoch's most important politically-focused early essay is the 1958 "A House of Theory," written for a collection, *Conviction*, by Labour Party and other left intellectuals, with the intent to provide new thinking for the Labour Party of the period. (Some of its themes are repeated more briefly in the influential, more literature-oriented, "Against Dryness" from 1961.) Murdoch locates herself as part of the socialist movement—not untypical of Labour party adherents of the time—something she had

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<sup>1</sup> In 1975 she writes a piece for the Sunday Telegraph, "Doing Down the Able Child: A Socialist's Case for Saving Our Grammar Schools," reprinted in Yozo Muroya and Paul Hullah (eds.), *Occasional Essays by Iris Murdoch* (Okayama, Japan: University Education Press, 1998).

not done in any of her writings prior to or in that period. Her inclusion in that volume testifies to her standing on the left in that period. I will discuss this incredibly rich and multi-faceted essay in three parts—Murdoch’s vision of socialism and the socialist movement and her criticisms of capitalism; the essay’s link to more familiar theoretical and philosophical concerns of Murdoch; and the issue of labour, which brings together the previous two aspects of the essay.

In HT, Murdoch aims to help revitalize the socialist movement by presenting a diagnosis of what has caused its current loss of energy, and articulating a vision of what the movement should aim to accomplish. She identifies several sources of motivation in the traditional socialist movement, some of which she embraces and some she rejects. In the former category are (1) Desire for human equality. (2) A society without exploitation (‘Giving to the movement its most characteristic and probably most profound motive, [HT: 171]). (3) ‘Benthamite efficiency,’ the desire to reject outdated traditions and run society and the economy rationally and efficiently with a clear focus on promoting human happiness (HT: 171). (4) The sense of community and common purpose in workingmen’s associations. That she would know anything about these associations is not revealed in any standard narrative we have of Murdoch’s life in the ‘40’s and ‘50’s, including Conradi’s biography. (5) The vision (equally Christian, anarchist, and Marxist) of an ideal community in which work would once again be creative and meaningful.

A final important source, of which Murdoch very much disapproves, and specific to the Marxist strand of the socialist tradition, is the deterministic theory of history that dooms capitalism to extinction, a theory presented as scientific in nature, yet also having a religious character in a ‘Messianic belief in the role of the proletariat (HT: 171).’

The socialist movement promoting these various ideals had diminished in part, she said, because the working class movement and the (capitalist) Welfare State (created by the Labour Party in the post-war period, with the National Health Service its most vaunted manifestation) had remedied ‘many of the most obvious injustices and deprivations’ of capitalism (HT: 172). Murdoch sees the Benthamite strand of socialism mentioned earlier as a prime impetus to these developments, while it also contributed to diminishing the salience of socialist ideas and critiques of capitalism in the wider society.

Although the Welfare State had muted the urgency of socialist ideals, Murdoch thought it almost entirely failed to address the deeper problems of capitalist society, including its failure to create the conditions for the values mentioned—equality, lack of exploitation, a sense of wider community, especially with regard to the processes of work. To these criticisms she added several others—a gulf between the ‘skilled and creative few’ and the ‘unskilled and uncreative many,’ the loss of proletarian culture (and the substitution of ‘half-baked amusements,’ that is, mass entertainment [she remained particularly critical of television]), and the conception of ‘equality of opportunity,’ masquerading as a form of equality, that created a form of class division ‘made more sinister by the removal of intelligent persons into the bureaucracy and the destruction of their roots and characteristics as members of the mass’ (HT: 183). The

last was especially prescient, in the spirit of Michael Young's hugely influential *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033* of the same year.

#### Theory and metaphysics

Murdoch focuses the bulk of her attention in HT on a distinctly intellectual source of socialism's diminishment in British popular consciousness—what she calls the “absence of theory” both in philosophy and more generally in popular intellectual consciousness. By “theory” she means a systematic exploration of abstract concepts that bear on human life—such as liberty, equality, democracy, dignity, work. She notes the suspicion of theory and also of metaphysics in the dominant British empiricist tradition, fed also by its more recent incarnation as linguistic philosophy. She thinks linguistic philosophy's idea of analyzing the logic of terms in a field of discourse might seem to make some sense in the field of morals (though she is quite critical of its actual results), but makes none at all in politics, as there is no ‘fundamental logical form of a political judgment’ and political thinking is necessarily historical in way that eludes linguistic analysis (HT: 177-78).

‘Metaphysics’ is not, for Murdoch, the same as ‘theory,’ as it need not be as systematic, and it always provides an all-encompassing, and value-infused, conception of reality, while theory may be more modest in its aspirations. But they overlap in Murdoch's diagnosis that philosophic resources that should be available to elaborate socialist thinking and its moral foundations have been taken as discredited by the anti-theory, anti-metaphysical tenor of British thought.

The undoubted advances of the Welfare State have rested intellectually on relatively thin notions of efficiency and ‘rational planning,’ drawn from the Benthamite approach (see also AD, 289f), contributing to larger and richer ideals losing their hold on the popular imagination. In a 1961 essay in *Encounter*, a prominent left, anti-Stalinist journal of politics and culture (later revealed to have been funded by the American CIA), Murdoch puts this point by saying, ‘We no longer use a spread-out substantial picture of the manifold virtues of man and society.’ (AD: 290)

While here and in her writings more generally Murdoch is far from entirely critical of the deflationary tendencies of the academic philosophy of her time, here she argues both that conceptual moral exploration survives the strictures of contemporary analytic philosophy (HT: 179), and also that in any case those strictures wrongly rule out a form of intellectual endeavor, carried out in society more generally, not only by specialists, that she characterizes here as ‘the vaguer and more generally comprehensible theorizing, which philosophy used to nourish and be nourished by’ (HT: 174).

Murdoch also points out that resistance to specifically political theorizing is fed by a prominent form of British political conservatism represented by Edmund Burke, Michael Oakeshott (a contemporary and friend of Murdoch's), and T.S. Eliot (HT: 178), according to which existing institutions and their animating ideas have a value that eludes abstract and critical theorizing that challenges them.

#### The issue of labour

Murdoch thinks the centerpiece of the form of socialist thought required in the age of the Welfare State is the issue of labour, 'transformation of labour from something senseless that forms no real part of the personality of the laborer into something creative and significant' (HT: 184). Taking labour seriously would require rethinking the notions of exploitation and alienation, the latter which she attributes to Hegel, and widespread interest in which was revived by the 1959 English translation of Marx's *1844 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. (Murdoch taught courses on this work in the early '60's.) Centering labour would also properly affect how the traditional ideas of equality, democracy, and freedom, drawn on by the socialist tradition, should be rethought.

Murdoch points to the tradition of Guild Socialism as a distinctly British contribution to the question of labour. That movement, especially influential in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, advocated for workers' control of their industries, and of the processes of work within them. She attributes to that tradition a concern with the destruction of community life, the degradation of work, and 'the division of man from man which the economic relationships of capitalism had produced.' (HT: 185). She recognizes that the Guild Socialist vision would have to be updated in light of later technological developments, including the need for expertise. But, she says, it is time to return to the path not taken, which she characterizes as 'a living morality [of] ideas common to Marx and William Morris [an influential late 19<sup>th</sup> century socialist concerned with the character and dignity of work, who promoted the British craft tradition]' (HT: 186).

Murdoch links absence of theory with the problem of the 'managerial society' (which she notes Marx had diagnosed as characteristic of capitalism), which divides the population into experts and the ignorant masses, with no communication between them, and also keeps the various experts locked into their mutually incomprehending silos. She calls for developing an 'area of translation' in which specialized concepts, while not losing their complexity, can be understood by the public, and specifically in light of moral and social ideals that are not the sole property of 'technicians' (HT: 181). Those ideals, she implies, are produced or examined by the 'theory' she is calling for. The desire for philosophical thought to be more organically linked to popular thinking, to enrich the lives of ordinary citizens, remains a periodic concern of Murdoch's, influencing her eschewing of technical academic terminology in her philosophical writing, including *MGM*.

Murdoch's wide-ranging and multi-faceted, though underdeveloped, view of socialism and the ills of capitalism is striking in part because one sees so little evidence of it in Murdoch's subsequent philosophical writing, and only peripheral signs of it in her fiction. (Exemplifying the latter is *The Bell*, published the same year as *HT*, that features a community, Christian in character, attempting to run itself somewhat on socialist principles.)

*Murdoch's political philosophy in Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*

In *HT* Murdoch looks to morality to supply the ideals and values that should guide the crafting or reform of the political realm. In *MGM*, she has changed her view of the foundations of political thought and its relationship to morality, by which she comes to mean the individual moral domain. She sees the individual-moral and political domains as governed by very different norms and principles, and each needs to be protected from the other, or at least from too much influence from the other. She sees the individual-moral domain as governed by a 'perfectionism' that is continuous from *SG* through to *MGM*. The aspiration to the highest moral goodness is the proper aim of the human person. However, the polity cannot be 'perfected'; its proper aim is to be 'decent' (*MGM*, 356), "to try to limit the evil contained therein" (368, from Simone Weil). Moral perfectionism does not apply to it.

The idea of a moral ideal that is social in character—such as equality, community, or dignified work—drops out of this picture, and is never engaged as such by Murdoch in *MGM*. It is not individual morality but nor is it (at least necessarily) politically 'perfectionist.' Policies that support the dignity of manual work, or greater economic equality, are not necessarily perfectionist. Murdoch, however, may have come to think that they were, or, perhaps that working out a political philosophy built around rejecting political perfectionism came to seem to her a more urgent focus for her thought than working out social-moral ideals.

#### Human nature and politics

In this spirit, Murdoch says that society, often characterized in *MGM* as the 'liberal democratic state,' must be organized in light of a realistic view of human nature. She sees that view as provided by Hobbes and Hume, who regarded human beings as largely self-interested, with (as in Hume) a limited capacity for human sympathy and concern for others. 'Everyone is an egoist. Everyone seeks his own private happiness, why not? (*MGM*: 368).' This view dovetails with that expressed in Murdoch's moral philosophy from the '60's on (articulated in *SG*)—the Christian view, given secular expression (as Murdoch sees it) in Freud, that human beings are 'fallen,' burdened by an egoistic nature that continually pulls us away from a clear-sighted regard and concern for others. No individual moral agent is doomed to this fate, and the whole point of Murdoch's moral philosophy is to point the way to a moral perfection for which individuals can and should strive. But the state cannot affect or help in this task; it is up to each individual. Meanwhile the state must be organized so that individuals are properly protected from the egoistic depredations of their fellow citizens. As a fundamental task of the state, security which must work with human beings as they are. As early as 1966, in an unpublished postscript to her essay "On 'God' and 'Good'," Murdoch states the view spelled out in *MGM* explicitly: 'a final acceptance of imperfection and incompleteness is built into politics in a way in which it is not built into personal morals.' (Murdoch 1966); and strikingly in *MGM*: 'Society must be thought of as a bad job to be made the best of' (*MGM*: 368).

This pessimistic view of human nature is only one thread in Murdoch's way of and reason for drawing a boundary between the individual-moral and the political, with distinct tasks and standards for each. She independently embraces the liberal idea of

freedom, that individuals should be able to work out their own lives in their own way, with minimal interference from (but protected by) the state. It is not only that the liberal state is an unfortunate compromise with a recalcitrant human nature.

The embrace of liberalism in *MGM* contrasts with Murdoch's earlier ambivalence about it. She had criticized liberalism in the '50's and '60's for its thin and inadequate conception of human nature, one she saw expressed in existentialism (which she once said was the most perfect expression of liberalism [*ME*: 70]) and in British linguistic moral philosophy. This liberal conception of the self prevented an adequate account of morality, which required both a robust structure of objective value external to the self, and a fuller and more complex view of the self that enables it to place itself properly with relation to the external structure of value. But by *MGM*, without entirely abandoning that view with respect to morality, Murdoch has fully embraced the *political* thrust of liberalism.

A third thread underpinning *MGM*'s division between the moral and the political is Murdoch's concern that individual morality not be swallowed up by 'public political morality' (*MGM*: 360). She does not provide much explanation of this, but says that both Marxism and the decline of religious belief have made people think their moral grounding must be in groups (presumably publicly recognized ones, such as one's class or race, though she does not make this clear) rather than within the individual herself. She tends to see the individual morality to which perfectionism applies as a morality of everyday interpersonal life, with friends, loved ones, and perhaps previously unknown persons encountered in one's quotidian existence. She also tends to see it as inward purification of one's consciousness. She does not want morality in either of these personal modes to get demoted in someone's adherence to political causes, and, in particular, ones tied to the plight of groups of which the agent is a member.

#### Axioms and the civic self

But this third strand does show that Murdoch sees morality as in some form applying to the political domain. At one point she puts the point this way: 'Liberal political thought posits a certain fundamental distinction between the person as citizen and the person as moral-spiritual individual' (*MGM*, 357). The person as citizen must adhere to the morality of a citizen, which is therefore part of the person's overall moral being. She articulates this civic form or aspect of morality mainly in the concept of 'axioms.' Axioms are (relatively) fixed and unavoidable constraints and requirements governing behavior, though they do not always take the form of prescribing or proscribing a specific action. Axioms do not form a system, but are distinct in their individual character, as illustrated by her most frequent example of an axiom-type, that of rights. She mentions, for example, the right to happiness, the right to vote, and rights animals have (presumably not to be made to suffer). Even if all are rights, they rest on different valuational foundations. An example of a non-rights axioms is that torture is wrong (*MGM*: 367).

Murdoch recognizes 'human rights' as a distinct subset of rights. She mentions 'women's rights,' 'black rights,' 'rights of the planet' (*MGM*: 361) but does not cite standard examples of human rights, such as freedom of conscience, thought or religion.

Though morally or normatively fixed points, axioms are not, in Murdoch's view, timeless truths discovered or articulated once for all. She sees them as historical products, connected with their being unsystematic and piecemeal. Women's coming to be seen as having equal rights with men might not have happened, but it did, and now (she thinks) has the status of an axiom. Axioms are products of genuine, if historically contingent, moral insight. Murdoch does not spell out how we recognize that a particular moral insight has attained the status of an axiom. It does not, for example, require the ratification of a national or international authoritative body. But she does presuppose a certain degree of public convergence, not easily specified, for something to be an axiom. Once attaining that status, all human beings (or members of a particular political society adopting certain civic axioms, such as the right to vote) are then bound by it. Murdoch does not overtly worry about whether the historical contingency of axioms might effect people's sense of their inviolability. Samuel Moyn suggests that it might when he shows that once the idea of 'human rights' became widely accepted globally, in the 1970's, there was a tendency to falsify the history of the idea, and see it as having a centuries-long pedigree. (Moyn 2010: 212ff)

Murdoch regards the historical contingency and unsystematic character of axioms as in part just a fact about them. But she also connects this feature with what she sees as their central purpose in protecting individuals: axiomatic political thinking 'tends to disrupt tyranny by a conception of the idiosyncratic individual as valuable per se.' It is not clear how the value pluralism involved in axioms involves the idiosyncratic individual. Elsewhere in the chapter she says 'Human beings are valuable because they are human beings, not because they are created by God, rational beings, or good citizens' (MGM, 365). This idea of human being seems a better candidate for what is protected by rights axioms than the 'idiosyncratic individual.' But the emphasis not only on the individual but his idiosyncrasy is a distinguishing feature of Murdoch's moral thought more generally, but especially in *MGM* (e.g. 349). It connects with her emphasis on a kind of ultimate contingency of human existence, which she sees as unrecognized and suppressed in grand theorizing. Moral requirements wrapped up in an internally cohesive system will never be able to capture the complexity, contingency and messiness of human life.

Axioms operate by being regarded as unconditional and inviolable standards that are readily understood, and so can be invoked and expect to be honored (Browning 2019: 185). They can fulfill this function, seemingly, only if they are not overly vague and open to multiple interpretations, and offer clear and readily comprehended directives: "Stop, you can't do that to a person," Murdoch gives as an example of how an axiom would be invoked to stop a tyrant (but it could be anyone) from treating a person in an unacceptable way. But rights are not Murdoch's only example of axioms. She mentions other values that do not have this seeming solidity, for example, the rights stated in the American Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The latter two hardly have the solidity of, say, the right to vote (and Murdoch notes that difference), or the prohibition against torture. What exactly is to be protected in the "right to happiness?"

Murdoch's reply to this is that appeals to a right to happiness means utilitarian considerations are always *prima facie* relevant and so must always be taken seriously (MGM: 365). Doing so does not always involve a definite prescription—such as letting someone smoke marijuana. It would allow plenty of room for interpretation and contestation about exactly what was to be permitted. But that happiness, or liberty, is an important desideratum, that it requires attention, is inviolable.

#### Relation between the individual-moral and political domains

Murdoch is concerned to protect the valuational integrity of both the individual-moral and the political domains, in light of how each can undermine the other. The moral can impose an inappropriate standard of perfection on the political, which in practice may well lead to repressive consequences. On the other side, the moral needs protection from the political lest the normative demands of politics come to undermine the domain of personal morality and personal moral transformation.

Nevertheless, Murdoch does not want to make this separation absolute. In several different ways she wants the moral to inform the political, to be a resource for shaping it. She says “a decent state has to have a continual infusion of ideas and ideals” (MGM: 358). Political and moral views change, and should change, and we need this continual infusion to make that happen. She mentions artists as an important source of such ideas and ideals. That is certainly right, but one would also want to mention political philosophers (such as Rawls, discussed below) as well as social movements that put forth new ideas and new framings, such as the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement of the 2010’s, and the movement against ‘sexual harassment’ that coined that term. Both introduced morally novel ways of thinking about human behavior and attitudes with respect to race or gender.

While Murdoch wants the moral to enrich the political, her way of invoking/conceptualizing the ‘civic,’ a related category, deprives her of an important source of such enrichment. She tends to understand the ‘civic’ as the domain of law and social order; the main obligation of the citizen is to obey those laws. She recognizes that civic morality is part of the individual’s moral being, that the moral agent can recognize its moral importance, not simply engage in it reluctantly or resentfully while recognizing its necessity. But she lacks the ‘civic republican’ notion of the civic domain as one where citizens engage with one another to craft policies to promote the common good, and where that engagement itself enriches the citizen (Sandel 1998).

Another alternative to Murdoch’s civic vision is that of John Rawls. Rawls is generally acknowledged to be the greatest Anglophone political philosopher of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet Murdoch does not mention him and shows no evidence of being aware of his work (originally published in 1971). In part this is because she simply does not engage with what is going on in professional philosophy in general, especially Anglo-American philosophy, in the period from the ‘70’s through the ‘90’s.

But Rawls is an important reference point for situating Murdoch’s admittedly minimally systematic reflections on politics. They share a commitment to the liberal tradition in wanting the state to protect a zone of freedom, compatible with a like freedom for others as Rawls puts it, and seeing such protection as a basic purpose of the



state. But Rawls sees a sense of justice as rooted as deeply in the human form of social being as is the self-interest Murdoch draws from Hobbes and Hume (and which Rawls agrees in conferring a foundational status, but not an exclusive one, as Murdoch does). Because of this Rawls thinks citizens will favor principles that render a society more equal in welfare goods, and will have a stronger sense of social solidarity, than Murdoch discusses or implies. This is not to say that Rawls or civic republicanism is right and Murdoch wrong, only that her particular conception of the civic fails to engage with a wider range of options than those she implies—a minimal liberal democracy, totalitarian socialism, or an unrealizable political perfectionism.

### *Marxism*

Murdoch is sometimes treated simply as an ‘ex-Communist’ who put the Communist part of her past behind her once she left the party. This is misleading in that Murdoch remained “on the left” for many years after. But a further feature of Murdoch’s politics, broadly construed, is the role Marxism played in her thinking long after she abandoned an allegiance to it as a political commitment or orientation. Marxism was a continuous and significant presence in her mental universe through *MGM*.<sup>2</sup>

Marxism played several distinct roles in Murdoch’s general philosophical and moral thinking. Most of these cannot be folded neatly into her political philosophy, especially as spelled out in *MGM*. Nevertheless, all these roles are at least indirectly political simply because the political character of Marxism is never forgotten.

Murdoch recognized Marxism as historically changing over time, on several different dimensions. First, she was aware of the ‘early’ much more philosophic Marx of the *1844 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, and changes in his views to the ‘late’ Marx, with its aspiration to be a ‘science’ of the development of society grounded in changes in its economic systems.

Murdoch was also very aware of the historical development of Marxism as an intellectual tradition, often interwoven with its role as the official ideology of the Soviet Union and the Soviet Empire. This brand of Marxism (Marxism-Leninism, or dialectical materialism) was expressed intellectually as an allegedly scientific doctrine of historical development, in which capitalism would collapse under the weight of its own developmental logic, and the proletariat would take over and rule the society in the name of universal values that could not have been embodied in any previous form of economic life (e.g. feudalism and capitalism). Murdoch recognized that this ‘scientific socialism’ constricted Marxism as a philosophy, especially as the oppressive character of the Soviet Union and its satellite states became increasingly manifest. She dates to the ‘30’s and ‘40’s a time in which theorists who saw themselves as Marxists but not Marxist-Leninist started to develop of revisionist form of Marxism (sometimes also called ‘Western Marxism’), which she found of significant intellectual interest, expressed scattershot throughout *MGM*, and also in her introduction to the 1987 re-issue of her

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<sup>2</sup> *MGM* contains many references to Marx and Marxism, not all of which are listed in the index, a more general problem with *MGM*’s index.

1953 book on Sartre. Sartre himself had turned to Marxism after the war, crafting a distinctly existential form of it, or a Marxist form of existentialism (culminating in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, in 1960). Murdoch's introduction traces this development in Sartre's thinking, of which she is largely critical (in part, on grounds similar to those she leveled against Sartre's non-Marxist existentialism), but which she places in the revisionist tradition that she sees as breathing new life into the Marxist tradition, while nevertheless entirely repudiating scientific Marxism. Murdoch tended to say that revisionist Marxism was no longer really Marxism, even while its exponents—especially the Frankfurt School figures of Adorno (in whom Murdoch was particularly interested), Horkheimer, and Benjamin—saw themselves as part of that tradition.

Keeping in mind this recognition of changes in Marx's own views; changes and developments in the intellectual tradition of Marxist philosophy; and attentiveness to the difference between the political uses to which Marxism had been put (largely to its detriment) and the more purely intellectual tradition built on Marxism, we can find several distinct uses to which Murdoch put Marxism in her philosophic writings, from essays in the '50's through *MGM* in 1992. The first is as a source of distinct moral ideals of which she approves. We have seen that she identifies in HT social solidarity, the abolition of exploitation, and an affirmation of the dignity of work (when properly organized) as Marxist ideas, though not only Marxist. Murdoch also mentions a more encompassing moral critique of capitalist society, discussed above. Finally, she sees Marxism as animated by utilitarian moral values, in no way specific to Marxism—identified with Benthamism, as mentioned above—but constituting some of its genuine appeal, in aspiring to make people in society less miserable and happier.

Murdoch's second positive take on Marxism relates to the contrast she frequently draws between an ethic in which the individual moral subject creates value and values (the existentialist/Liberal view), and one in which the individual is placed in a larger reality already infused with values and must discern those values and find his or her place in that reality. In 'Metaphysics and Ethics' (1957), Murdoch includes Marxism (along with Thomism and Hegelianism) in the latter category (which she here calls the 'Natural Law' view). Though she does not spell out her specific view of Marxism in this context, presumably she has in mind the Marxist analysis of history and society within which class struggle takes place, with the proletariat aiming at the goal of universal flourishing and realization of the values of justice, community and meaningful work mentioned above. The individual moral agent can then decide whether or not to join that revolutionary struggle.

Although Murdoch is not at this stage in her thought positively affirming any of the aforementioned 'larger reality' views, she sees each of them as expressing a metaphysical dimension of reality absent in the moral philosophy of this period and in the absence of which an adequate moral outlook is impossible.

In the aforementioned postscript to her 1966 OGG, Murdoch provides an overall take on what she sees as the value of the Marxist tradition, not limited to its revisionist strands: 'And, although I think classical Marxism is mistaken in its view of the perfectibility of society and the inevitability of development, there is a world of wisdom

in Marxism for the political moralist. (The Marxist critique of the Capitalist view of 'work' seems to me particularly significant.) Marxism has the merit of being an explicitly moral and idealistic method of political thinking, in theory at any rate, and theory is always capable of refreshing practice.' (Murdoch 1966)

Taking into account the full sweep of her thought including *MGM*, Murdoch much more frequently expresses a critical take on Marxism, on several different grounds. First, although she rejects the existentialist/individualist picture, she is also concerned that the Natural Law view can end up swallowing up the individual, either in a deterministic sweep of history that undermines individual agency, or in reifying the larger value structure in a way that leaves no room to value the contingent and idiosyncratic individual. This criticism can apply to any of the larger metaphysical frameworks, not only Marxism. However, it applies especially acutely to Marxism since it is not only a way of thinking but the official basis of oppressive political orders of certain states.

Murdoch sees Marxism as attacking the individual moral subject in a yet different way than the 'swallowing up' just mentioned. This consists in the Marxist criticism of moral and political individualism as essentially a defense of the 'bourgeois' individual, that is, individuals allegedly beholden to capitalist values (a broader category than actual capitalists, i.e. owners of the means of production). Murdoch sees Marxism in this regard as contributing to an unfortunate intellectual trend in which other views more explicitly undermining of the importance of the individual as a moral subject can arise. She has Derrida's post-structuralism particularly in mind.

Her third critical take is a rejection of the Marxist claim to scientific status (a claim central to Marxism-Leninism, abandoned in revisionist Marxism). There is no scientifically-guaranteed historical trajectory toward the realization of the values espoused by Marxism. In addition, the attempt to give a scientific foundation for a struggle to realize humane values in society partakes of an over-valoring of science and the scientific method itself that Murdoch is critical of more generally. She affirms that values are as much a part of reality as is the world described by science, so we should not take science as the paradigm and template for human knowledge. In the case of Marxism she also sees the reach for science as having inhibited the development of a Marxist ethic. If we know beforehand that capitalism will be destroyed and the proletarian revolution triumphant, we are less motivated to explore both the values that revolution should aim to bring about, and the moral values we should uphold while living in capitalist society and simultaneously trying to bring about a socialist society. The criticism that the reach for a 'scientific' foundation for socialism's historical authority drives out the required moral foundation for socialism is close to Simone Weil's critique of Marxism in her writing in the early/mid 1930's (collected in *Oppression and Liberty* [Weil 1955]). Weil makes the point that the struggle against oppression should itself be animated by the values that the oppressed and their allies aim to realize, not a sense that they are on the right side of history or science. Murdoch is deeply

influenced by Weil in other areas, and it is not clear if this is true as well of (or even if she knew of) her critique of Marxism.<sup>3</sup>

Although Murdoch holds such criticisms of comprehensive theories of history and human life, and Marxism in particular, she nevertheless sees value in the attempt to propound such theories. In *MGM* she says that grand visions often provide a basis for broad speculations that can find their way into, and enrich, ordinary moral and political thought, as mentioned above. Her 1987 novel *The Book and the Brotherhood* contains a striking affirmation of such grand theorizing, including in a Marxist mode. The novel concerns a group of friends from university who long ago agreed to finance a book planned by one of their number, David Crimond, a ‘maverick Marxist’ political theorist. The friends have drifted toward mainstream liberal democratic parliamentarianism, political views out of line with Crimond’s, but, with great ambivalence and internal disagreement, the ‘brotherhood’ has continued to support Crimond’s project. Crimond is portrayed as a despicable and in some ways destructive human being. But when he finally does write the work, one member of the brotherhood, a morally central voice in the novel, is dazzled by the power and insight of its systematic sweep, and insists that, while he does not agree with much of it, it is a work that should be widely read.<sup>4</sup> Murdoch clearly regards Marxism, as an ongoing intellectual tradition, as a permanently valuable intellectual resource and touchstone for serious philosophical endeavor, as she does Hegel, Heidegger, Schopenhauer, Buber and others (all at a level below that of Kant, and, especially, Plato).

#### *Murdoch on Sexual Orientation and Race*

Murdoch’s political thought extends beyond her explicitly political/philosophical writings. It is interesting to, at least briefly, relate aspects of her thought to several issues of particular concern in our current political context—sexual orientation, and race.<sup>5</sup> Neither of these (or gender either) are more than peripherally addressed in her formal philosophical work. As mentioned, in *MGM* she relies on a notion of human rights, that she sees as applying to gender and race.<sup>6</sup> But beyond that, these areas not given any attention. However, we can glean Murdoch’s views from other sources—her novels, occasional essays in less academic venues, and interviews.

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<sup>3</sup> Weil’s writings on work, including some essays in *Oppression and Liberty*, emphasize the need for manual labor to draw on the worker’s intelligence, and that this is an important source of dignity in labor, a foundation for a good society—themes also expressed by Murdoch in *HT*. *Oppression and Liberty* was published in French in 1955, so Murdoch could have known of it when she wrote *HT*, and certainly in her later reflections on Marxism.

<sup>4</sup> Gerard says, “[I]t’s not what we want to hear now but we have to hear it [BB, 565].”

<sup>5</sup> Murdoch’s relation to gender is taken up in ‘Murdoch and Feminism’ in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, Murdoch does not apply the rights framework explicitly to sexual orientation in *MGM*.

Murdoch's views about homosexuality were very far-sighted for her time. As early as 1958, she had created a very sympathetic and complex gay male main character, in *The Bell*. In 1964 she published a short essay "The Moral Decision About Homosexuality." (Male homosexuality was criminalized in the UK until 1967; female homosexuality was not criminalized.) The essay methodically eviscerates familiar and widespread arguments of the time (some still familiar today) against homosexuality—that it is unnatural (response: not everything natural is good); that homosexual relationships are unstable (response: society's failure to recognize them contributes to this; the difficulty of human relationships is not confined to homosexual ones; and unstable relationships are not necessarily bad); that homosexuality is a disease (response: it isn't). Murdoch also exhibits substantial familiarity with aspects of gay male life. For example, 'Some people have always been homosexual, others have become homosexual after a brief homosexual prelude, some have both characteristics, and some, having searched vainly for a heterosexual mate, settle down later in life with a homosexual one.' (Murdoch 1964: 34).<sup>7</sup> The essay seems concerned only with gay men rather than also lesbians, although this is not entirely clear. In summarizing her views on homosexuality there, she invokes a human rights framework not spelled out philosophically until *MGM*.

Murdoch's relation to race is quite different. She did not write about this topic explicitly. She has only two significant non-white characters in her novels—a half-West Indian major character in *Time of the Angels* (1966) and a half-Indian minor character in *A Word Child* (1975).<sup>8</sup> But in a discussion at a French conference on her novels in 1978, Murdoch addresses the issue of writing from and on different 'identity positions', speaking about both race and gender. She says that as a woman writer, 'I want to write about things on the whole where it doesn't matter whether you're male or female.' Then she adds, '...in which case, you'd better be male, because a male represents ordinary human beings, unfortunately as things stand at the moment, whereas a woman is always a woman.' (Chevalier: 82) Later in the conversation, she adds that her understanding of the goal of 'women's liberation' is that women should come to be and be seen as 'ordinary', as 'just like everybody else.' Murdoch implies here that she thinks the same about race, and her inclusion of both blacks and women in the equal (human) rights framework implies this also. She is saying that if a writer wants to write about the

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<sup>7</sup> Murdoch was well aware that she herself had 'both characteristics' (sexual attraction to both men and women); but, though many male homosexual characters people her novels, there are few lesbian characters. [[NB: should I mention this?]]

<sup>8</sup> Murdoch occasionally employs briefly-mentioned South Asian or Black figures, as part of the social environment of the characters in the novel, e.g. as a tenant or upstairs neighbor. One who does not manage to become a real character but plays an important role in revealing and developing the moral quality of actual characters in the book is a Jamaican set upon by a gang of white racist louts in a pub where four character are gathered, in *A Fairly Honorable Defeat* (238–242). This scene is discussed in Blum 2012.

universal human condition, independent of race, she would have to write white characters, who are thus seen (on the analogy to men) as 'ordinary human beings;' and that 'black liberation' should be understood as blacks becoming and being seen as 'ordinary human beings' (Chevalier: 83).<sup>9</sup>

Looking back at this line of thought from a vantage point informed by the importance of colonialism and the post-colonial experience in Britain, as well as by a deeper understanding of how race affects people's life situations, we can identify certain limitations of Murdoch's way of thinking. In a society characterized by pervasive, structural racial inequality, a writer's white characters cannot occupy a universal, race-neutral mode of merely 'ordinary' being. While of course not every aspect of white characters is a mere manifestation of their raciality, raciality cannot disappear from the world they inhabit to create the race-neutral condition Murdoch envisions.

In addition Murdoch's equal rights racial and gender ideal, involving women and blacks as 'ordinary,' while a familiar liberal color-blind ideal in 1978, would be seen as limited from an anti-racist vantage point. First, it fails to recognize 'structural racism'—the ways that groups defined by race occupy unequal social positions along many dimensions (income, occupation, health, political power, and so on). Second, subordinate race-defined groups generally see themselves as members of embedded communities constituted at least in part by their shared experiences of current and past racial positionality. Those experiences and communal ties are quite often (not always) important to racially subordinate persons' sense of identity. Third, racial positionality also creates epistemic differences—different ways of viewing society and particular social phenomena. These have given rise to a whole new sub-field of philosophy, social epistemology.

These three limitations do not require rejecting the universalism of the human rights framework. But they suggest that racial justice, equality, and liberation involve more than that framework provides, affirming a kind of racial group particularism and communality. Racial history, including the experience of empire and post-coloniality would have to be engaged with and taken account of in understandings of persons in

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<sup>9</sup> This formulation of 'ordinary' is quite important to Murdoch's way of understanding inequality. In relation to the homosexual relationship between two major characters in *Fairly Honorable Defeat*—a relationship Murdoch says she intentionally created in order to portray a loving gay male relationship (Chevalier 74)—one character sees the other as helping him to understand that being gay is 'ordinary' and Murdoch beautifully brings out the significance to the character of this way of seeing his sexual orientation and himself (FHD 37). [[NB: this note could perhaps be omitted. I include it partly to show that the notion of being seen as 'ordinary' is important to Murdoch beyond her saying so in the Chevalier interview; and partly for me to have a way of saying something positive about it, to leaven the more neutral or negative way I discuss it in the text.]]

racially subordinate groups. This perspective is required as well of whites, as the dominant group in that history. The universalism that may exist as a compelling social ideal cannot be successfully achieved in the writer's universe by neglecting all these aspects of the racially subordinate and dominant characters' world.

Later in this same interview, Murdoch says, 'I disapprove of "separatism" as a mode of liberation: women's studies, black studies, and nonsense of that sort. The point is to join the great mainstream of thought and art from which we have been excluded' (Chevalier: 83). Here Murdoch is taking a position on heated debates of the time. Again, from a post-colonial perspective, this view has some limitations. Joining a 'mainstream' that fails to overcome its structural racism rooted in historic colonial relationships is a meager ideal. Much of the disciplinary work of black and women's studies is directed toward the many-faceted project of coming to terms with an unjust racial and gender history in the name of a more expansive and just national society.