

Simon Blackburn. This review appeared in the TLS some time around 1995.

Iris Murdoch

METAPHYSICS AS A GUIDE TO MORALS

Iris Murdoch wastes no time in plunging the reader into the central themes of this huge, intelligent, rambling exploration of religion, art, metaphysics and morals. We crave “old and prized unities”, and fear “plurality, diffusion, senseless accident chaos”. Before the middle of the second page, Hume’s view that the unity of the self is an illusion, as is the unity of objects of the ordinary world, has been parried by Kant, resurrected by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida, nodded away by Wittgenstein (“philosophy leaves everything as it is”), and associated with the end of the era of Descartes and Plato. We then turn from those eight thinkers to Art. This dizzy pace, tremendously sustained, is not to be despised. The blurb says unblushingly that this book is for everyone, “though it is also incidentally an introduction to philosophy”. Everyone can seldom have been so flattered and those who need introductions to philosophy seldom put on such a pedestal. There is nevertheless an irony when Murdoch’s leading moral idea of the respect implied in “attention or contemplation of looking carefully at something and holding it before the mind” immediately follows. Attention to, for instance, Kant’s response to Hume usually takes rather a lot of time, and a couple of lines is not long to hold it before the mind.

Art is associated with morality by way of the notions of truth and respect. Great art “inspires because it is separate, it is for nothing, it is for itself. It is an image of virtue. Its condensed, clarified presentation enables us to look without sin upon a sinful world. It renders innocent and transforms into truthful vision our baser energies connected with power, curiosity, envy and sex.” It is the transformation into truthful vision that brings in metaphysics. The base and selfish Ego is associated with falsity, fantasy and the benighted inability to see things truthfully: morality and art draw us out of ourselves (an image she connects with the myth of Apollo and Marsyas) and take us towards a selfless, pure, tranquil vision of things as they are. The final end of this religious or ethical pilgrimage is to know of perfection, to Know the Good. The language of religion is in place here, and the theological ideas of a necessary unconditional being (God equalling the Good and equalling the object of St Anselm’s ontological argument with which Murdoch has an unusual sympathy). Experience with great art is at least similar. It affords us a route to understanding the wider spiritual journey, although nobody is more aware than Murdoch of the prettifying, magical illusions of false art.

In this book, on a wider canvas than her previous philosophical works, she invokes not only Plato, but theologians like Anselm and Buber, the philosophers Descartes, Kant, Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein, the spiritual path of Zen, the mystics Eckhardt, Kierkegaard and especially Simone Weil, to persuade us of her vision. The philosophers, apart from Plato, are of qualified assistance, for she has a keen eye for the points at which they could not wholeheartedly concur with her vision of the pilgrimage. Wittgenstein, for instance, although the most friendly mysticism of great modern philosophers, nevertheless attacks “the inner” and Murdoch parries this in what is by conventional philosophical standards one of the most closely argued chapters of the book, by the association of consciousness with moral activity and evaluation, a permanent inner process of variously successful states of attention. Schopenhauer, although satisfactorily equipped with a vision of an underlying, unconditional world force is criticized for lacking a definition of determinism. But I am not sure he needs one. He only needs his marvellous comparison of the free agent with the free water: “I can make my high waves ... I can rush down hill ... I can finally boil away and disappear ... but I am doing none of these things now, and am voluntarily remaining quiet and clear water in the reflecting pond”). Kant, too, with his democratization of goodness, making it available to a rationality we all share, ignores its real connection with the rare, élite, Platonic vision.

As well as this central theme, the book contains a great deal of reflection on other modern philosophers, on the morality of ordinary life, on deconstruction and the nature of language, and of course on art and literature themselves. There are incisive things said about Shakespeare, Schopenhauer, Sartre, Derrida, Marx, Freud, Rilke and many others. There are only perfunctory mentions of English philosophers of her generation: Ayer (“this brilliant young man’s book certainly poses deep problems, even if these problems are given to say the least a rather hasty treatment”) and Ryle (“Even if one disagrees with his behavioural thesis, his lively descriptions may be read as ‘phenomenology’”). Always, though we circle back to the “responsible moral spiritual individual”, the transcendental ideas that it takes to sustain him, and the threats he is under from the fragmentations of the modern age. The word “spiritual” is not in that description by accident: “The relation of religion, morality and philosophy is perhaps the great intellectual problem of the age,” she says, acknowledging Heidegger.

Why does this strike such a false note? Why do good sensible thoughts about the value of paying attention to others transpose into this hothouse combination of Uplift and Transcendentalism, as if a caucus of Thoesophists had decided to infiltrate the Aristotchan Society? Many of Murdoch's novels work through the same themes, but literary critics have not confronted the central metaphysical vacuum. From A.S. Byatt's impressive older study to Peter Conradi's impressive newer one, there seems to be slightly nervous acquiescence in the "philosophical" side of her vision, put aside in favour of detailed appreciation of her plotting and her characters. Alasdair MacIntyre has confessed to mistrusting her individualistic picture of the moral self, but only Harold Bloom goes so far as to find the moral vision repellent, although I shall argue later that the word is well placed. It is often said that the later novels progressively exhibit a tendency to embrace the contingency, detailed, unfinished moral psychology of ordinary human mess and "muddle", different in this from the Gothic, religious fables of her earlier works. One might therefore expect the contrast between the muddle and the Good to become more of a fifth wheel than an achieved part of the vision of how life actually needs to work, yet here in her philosophical testament there is no sign of that. The Ineffable, Transcendental magnet pulls on.

The age-old device, freely indulged, is to exalt the mystery of the necessary and unconditional Good by debasing the everyday. The more depraved the unredeemed spirit seems, the greater the importance of redemption. Since the everyday is so abject, we need a transfiguration to become anything good or truthful. Christianity, like Plato, is entirely dependent on this bleak estimate of our moral situation, and in Murdoch they are abetted by her deep admiration for Freud. The casual downgrading of the everyday plays its desired role. What she does not confront is that it does so, often quite artlessly, by betraying the very clarity and truthfulness that she is officially celebrating.

Consider a sentence like this: "Television with its flickering series of trivial momentary unreflective uncomprehended images pictures the state of the prisoners in the Cave who can only see the flickering shadows of things which are themselves copies of real things". Every word here suggests a failure of attention. Images on a television do not flicker. They may or may not depict trivial events or say trivial things about them; often they do not. They may or may not be momentary: television can give us an unflinching gaze at a childbirth or any other process stretched in time. The images themselves are in a trivial sense unreflective, just as words and paintings are, but that is because it would be a category mistake to call them

reflective: only conscious subjects reflect. They are not typically unreflective in the sense that no reflection went into making them, any more than words or paintings are. They may or may not be comprehended. More substantially, television does not picture (model?) the unredeemed state of *cikasia*. Television gives us visual information that is in interesting ways extremely like the visual information we would get by a direct view of a scene, and this is not an apt metaphor for the state of the Prisoners in Plato's myth. Television does not give us shadows of copies of things.

In sum, the sentence is untruthful, and the ancient battle between philosophy (seeing things truthfully) and the rhetoric is joined precisely over the importance of this fact. Such writing works rhetorically only because Murdoch's reader is already half disposed to the myth of our Fallen State, the need for redemption through art, and disgust at the everyday modern life of which television is a convenient symbol. The relentless downgrading of the everyday is eventually almost comical: even while admitting that "there are worse ends than pursuit of an unexacting happiness". Murdoch concludes the same sentence: "it is better to be cheered up by a silly sentimental novel than by plans of revenge". The insinuated equation between being concerned with the everyday and contingent, and mired in the silly and the sentimental, is the part that is, eventually, repellent. The everyday and contingent include smiling at a neighbour, saving the child, alleviating the pain, earning a living, or teaching the truth.

But Murdoch's attitude to truth is equally uncompromising. She shares Bradley's view that anything less than the whole truth is false, as if it is only after the last qualification and the last touch of the artist's brush that anything true has been said at all. At least since *Under the Net* she has contrasted the "unutterably particular" individual situation with language as a "machine for making falsehoods" and the same contrast, with the same promise of reconciliation only through great completed vision, is made here. This is perhaps a feeling natural to anyone trying to depict the human psyche: as Conrad reminds us, the last word, the word whose ring would shake both heaven and earth, is not said. But as Conrad also reminds us, if heaven and earth must not be shaken, it is because we know so many truths about either. Completeness may be a delusive goal, something that in Kant's words is only "set us as a task", but truth is not. There are banal truths, and truths that leave more to be said. The unutterable particularly of a situation is not an invitation to a different way of knowing, unclouded by language, and innocent of thought.

Our activities include simple acts of altruism and compassion. Evil is banal because evil people are not touched by supernatural demons, but because they exhibit ordinary human follies and vices in highlighted circumstances. Goodness is banal because ordinary human virtues of compassion, justice, prudence and altruism are not uncommon. Of course, there is the old debate about whether they really mask “power, curiosity, envy and sex”, but since Butler and Hume the weight of philosophical opinion has been that there is no good evidence for these universal, unlikely reinterpretations. Just as the Mafia chief can really want his rival dead, and not for the gratification it gives him, so the doctor can really want the child cured, and not for the gratification that this would give him. But banal goodness is invisible to the Platonic-Christian-Freudian eye. Mentioning the “calmly unobtrusive good man” of Kierkegaard, Murdoch flares out: “is this ideal not related to the demonic or Luciferan ideal of Nietzsche or the authentic heroic man of Heidegger or Sartre?” and before the answer “No” has time to frame itself, religious and penitential ideals are firmly back in the saddle.

Metaphysics has nothing to do with it. No experience modelled on seeing something has any immediate connection with anything worth regarding as a superior degree of banal goodness: visions do not beatify. Nothing will do as well as something about which nothing can be said. Some mystics have been ascetics: Murdoch does not mention that Simone Weil starved herself to death. Others have not. Many seem to have indifferent to that sufferings of others, as one well might be when seeing the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. The Gospel persona, in spite of the “five geniuses” who celebrate him, exhibited a reasonable share of sectarianism, bad temper, vindictive emphasis on punishment, and indifference to social issues, such as the institution of slavery (which the fifth genius, Paul, enjoins Christians to enjoy). We should recognize that withdrawal into a private state of beatific nothing is itself an act of will, and one whose results are to be assessed by moral criteria, and often found inappropriate, indulgent, wish-fulfilling and fantastical. Of course, there may be people of large, broad vision and sympathy, whose stoicism or acceptance of fate commands respect and makes us talk of wisdom, and who feel themselves to have had a vision of an *ens realissimum*. But then there are many who do not. Their admirable habits of thought and feeling are simply given or, more often, achieved by Aristotelian practice (Murdoch would say, repulsively contingent).

The strong component of her world is not the religious Platonism, but the everyday relationship between getting things right, seeing things as they are, on the one hand (Cézanne or Chekhov), and virtue on the other. But does the connection here justify, so immediately,

the Socratic equation of virtue with knowledge? Is not Kant right that it depends on the quality of the will, for knowledge can always be put to bad ends? It is rather that this knowledge, in the context of human affairs, clears the path for a proper exercise of virtue, which will otherwise stumble over the mistaken interpretations of ourselves and others which it is so fatally easy to give. It is easier to behave badly when we do not know what we are doing, and easier to behave well when we do. But any closer connection is highly contentious. Even in the sphere of the selfish, there is no obvious difficulty in imagining a character who sees perfectly clearly that his own future well-being is compromised by a present imprudence, but who persists in spite of that. It was not failure of vision that let him down but misdirection of the will. At least, if this is not the right thing to say, the question of why it is not needs a more patient, careful, handling than we have here.

In saying this, I am neither endorsing a “fact-value” distinction nor an emotivism that, as Murdoch put it in *The Sovereignty of the Good*, makes value into the “banner of the questing will”. There are different stories about ways in which morality might get to be a fact. It would be quite possible to hold that compassion and justice, once present as a component of the psyche, so change our sensibilities that we come to recognise moral aspects of things that would otherwise be hidden. It is certainly possible to develop an emotivism that has no truck with the existentialist freedom that leaves us unable to experience duty and virtue as exercising demands, and even unconditional demands. Such theories are abundant in the post-1940s literature: their evaluation requires patient, loving attention to argument and philosophical detail. The cause of assessing their truth is not helped by a blanket association with “cynicism”, let alone relativism, consequentialism, and absolutism – one of the odd, scattershot, concatenations with which Murdoch likes to unbalance us. Again, of course, the quicker we can damn modern trends in ethical theory the more seductive the appeal to salvation through Platonized religion.

The myth of the Cave, the difference not in degree but in kind, of the great artistic vision, the attainment of a superior state of knowing, the need for religion to sanctify the rest of life, the fear of the rootless modern self, are none of them contemptible themes. It is salutary for those of us in the profession to remember that there is an audience out there eager for their enchantments. The only defence I know is to avoid sentimental, untruthful tales, and to see things clearly, and criticize and celebrate them freely and justly. The words are Murdoch’s own, but their application demands a different pace and a different focus.