

Preface

It is fall of 1991, and I am sitting on a sloping bank of the Cherwell River in University Parks, Oxford, England. Hunched over a small canvas, I am concentrating on capturing in oil paint the moving reflections of low-hanging beech and chestnut tree branches, clouds, and broken spikes of sunlight, when I feel a presence nearby. I turn to look up over my shoulder, where a woman in a long, checkered wool overcoat and bucket hat is standing a few yards away.

“It’s very difficult, isn’t it?” she says.

“Yes,” I reply, grateful for the acknowledgment and somewhat disheartened that my efforts are not more impressive. I turn to look back at the river, and a few moments later, Iris Murdoch resumes her walk.

Murdoch was well-acquainted with painting. She painted during her student days, taught in the Royal College of Art, seriously considered becoming an art historian, and paid homage to paintings in some of her novels. She brought the power of images to all her work. Her critical analysis of philosophical positions was made alive through images and pictures. Her exploration of the aesthetic dimension of philosophical reasoning was a significant creative layer and guide in her apprehension of moral values and human consciousness. Her contributions brought a new vitality to philosophical thinking, addressing our problems in life as it is lived. “Philosophers are artists, and metaphysical ideas are aesthetic; they are intended to clarify and connect, and they certainly satisfy deep emotional needs” (Murdoch, 1993: 37).

For Murdoch, our activity of thinking with language has imagery “riddled” with the sensible (Murdoch, 1997: 39). Metaphor is involved all the time in our everyday search to make connections with our experiences. “Metaphor is not a peripheral excrescence upon the linguistic structure, it is its living centre” (1997: 40).

Murdoch understood one of philosophy’s tasks “involves seeing the absolute oddity of what is familiar and trying to formulate really probing questions about it” (1997: 8). Analogous to poetry, philosophy involves “a difficult purification of one’s statements, of thought emerging in language” (1997: 5). Her own work demonstrates an unwavering commitment to attending to difficult questions and the deep pleasures that emerge in doing so.

Jil Evans

I have been surprised by Iris Murdoch in three ways.

First, I have come to realize how ingenious Murdoch’s work was in challenging the philosophy of mind of her day. Postwar British philosophy was

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antagonistic to recognizing the robust reality of inner subjective experience. As coauthor Jil Evans and I argue in Section 2, Murdoch challenged the then-dominant quasi-behaviorism long before well-known philosophers like Thomas Nagel did. The history of modern philosophy of mind needs to recognize Murdoch's timely, significant contributions.

Second, over many years of writing and teaching about the role of Platonism in early modern philosophy, I have connected Murdoch's Platonism with the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonists. Like Murdoch, the Cambridge Platonists argued for moral realism and gave a central role to love in their value theory and metaphysics; they opposed reductive materialism and determinism. Seeing Murdoch's work in this historical perspective impacted my understanding of the history of philosophy and religion.¹

Third, while the focus of *Murdoch and the Transcendent* is Murdoch's philosophical work, her success as a novelist led me to adjust my teaching philosophy. In many classes I invite students to write, in addition to formal academic essays, philosophically interesting fiction.

Charles Taliaferro

1 Iris Murdoch In Situ

The truth-seeking mind is magnetized by an Independent multiform reality.
 Iris Murdoch (1993: 301)

Iris Murdoch is an ideal subject for this series of Cambridge Elements – the history of philosophy and theology in the West – given her respect for theology and her substantial contributions to philosophy. “Philosophy and theology, for all their persistent mutual hostilities, have always maintained relations and, contrary to some appearances, still do” (1993: 229). Murdoch's philosophical work and her successful career, authoring twenty-six novels, several plays, and a volume of poetry, present us with the challenge of addressing a large body of work that extends in many directions. As George Steiner observed: “Murdoch's papers, lectures, reviews are like a light-house: the beam circles around and around the central axis of the Good taking in, at each successive sweep, a vast and diverse horizon” (1997: xii). Our task requires us to survey the complex intellectual climate in which she wrote in order to bring the boldness of her contributions into context and relief. She opposed the reigning philosophical methodologies and arguments of her day.

¹ Taliaferro, “The Sovereignty of the Good in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy,” *Evidence and Faith*, 11–109.

In this section we offer a sketch of her life, describe some of the main philosophical forces active in her day, and introduce her proposed alternative to the status quo. Future sections will be more detailed and evaluative of what we see as compelling and enduring in Murdoch's work. While we reference some of her novels, limitations of space compel us to focus on her philosophical and theological work.

1.1 The Truth-Seeking Mind

Jean Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) was born in Dublin, Ireland, to Anglo-Irish parents who moved to London in her early years. An only child, she grew up as an Anglican and there is some evidence that, despite her subsequent atheism and rejection of traditional Christianity, she had a lifelong respect for Christian teachings about love, forgiveness, repentance, and redemption, as well as its “mythology” and rites, especially prayer and meditation. She wrote, “We do not need to believe in God to make sense of the motto of Oxford University: *Dominus illuminatio mea*” (1997: 425). The motto “The Lord is my light” is taken from Psalm 27. Her assertion suggests that she retained some notion of the divine or the sacred, what she would call the Good or goodness, and the importance of people being illuminated and transformed by goodness. Murdoch wrote so extensively on God, Christianity, and religion that her husband, John Bayley, referred to her as a theologian.²

Later in life she came to have a growing attraction to Buddhism. She appreciated the shared Buddhist and Christian commitment to compassion and opposition to selfishness. While she sometimes described herself as a Buddhist Christian, it is implausible to think of her as fully subscribing either to Buddhism or to traditional Christianity.³

From 1938 to 1942 at Somerville College, Oxford University, Murdoch undertook the course of *Literae Humaniores* (otherwise known as “Greats”), which included classics, ancient history, and philosophy. Among her influential tutors were Donald M. MacKinnon, a philosophical theologian and devout Anglican, and Eduard Fraenkel, a Jewish classics scholar who fled Nazi Germany in 1934. While at Somerville, she was attracted to Marxism and was a member of the Communist Party during those student years (approximately 1938–1942).

After graduating from Oxford with first-class honors, she spent five years working for the British Treasury and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, serving in London, Belgium, and Austria.

² Bayley, “Foreword,” *Iris Murdoch: A Life*, xi.

³ Robjant, “As a Buddhist Christian; the misappropriation of Iris Murdoch,” 993–1008.

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We have recently been given a fuller portrait of Murdoch during these years through her letters and diary from 1939 to 1945 in *Iris Murdoch, A Writer at War*, edited by Peter J. Conradi. These personal papers provide an intimate look at Murdoch's transition from her student days as a member of a performing troupe, the Magpie Players, to being part of the British war effort and caring for refugees and displaced persons. We see Murdoch's growing passion to be a writer. In a letter dated July 1943, she wrote, "Later on in August I hope to spend a week in Oxford where I shall not walk at all but shall think the whole time. What about? My chief thought will probably be 'Whether or not I am a writer' – a thought that has obsessed me."⁴ Her letters to two wartime friends – Frank Thomson, poet and British commando officer, and David Hicks, serving the British Council overseas – reveal close observations of the people in her life, some of whom she loved passionately.

In 1947 she spent a year as a postgraduate, studying philosophy at Newnham College, Cambridge University, where she met philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Despite his formidable reputation, Murdoch had reservations about Wittgenstein's philosophical methodology and his view about the meaning of language.

Murdoch returned to Oxford in 1948 as a tutor at St. Anne's College, lecturing in philosophy. She retired from St. Anne's as Honorary Fellow in 1963 and turned to writing full-time, except for three years of occasional teaching at the Royal College of Art.

From Murdoch's undergraduate days at Oxford onward, she formed close, lifelong friendships with three women – Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Mary Midgley – who all went on to become prominent philosophers. They shared and revered the same tutor, Donald M. MacKinnon, who stood out in his opposition to the fascism of Franco in the Spanish Civil War (opposing Britain's policy of being noninterventionist) and for his commitment to metaphysics, ethics, and religious faith in the face of skepticism by other Oxford dons and students. Murdoch, Anscombe, Foot, and Midgley challenged the dominant, predominantly male Oxford philosophers. This cohort has recently been celebrated by two books: *Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life*, by Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman, and *The Women Are Up to Something: How Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch Revolutionized Ethics*, by Benjamin J. B. Lipscomb. Both books highlight how Murdoch and her friends renewed

⁴ Conradi (ed.), *Iris Murdoch, A Writer at War*, 150.

the practice of philosophy, making room for engaging in the philosophy of love, focusing on substantial moral concerns involving interior reflection, and insisting on the importance of metaphysics.

Consider Midgley's account of how she, Murdoch, and other women found a different way of practicing philosophy than the way of their male peers.

As a survivor of the wartime group, I can only say: sorry, but the reason was indeed that there were fewer men about then.... What is wrong is a particular style of philosophising that results from encouraging a lot of clever young men to compete in winning arguments. These people then quickly build up a set of games out of simple oppositions and elaborate on them until, in the end, nobody else can see what they are talking about.... By contrast, in the wartime classes – which were small – men (conscientious objectors, etc.) were present as well as women, but they weren't keen on arguing.

It was clear that we were all more interested in understanding this deeply puzzling world than putting each other down. That was how Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Iris Murdoch, Mary Warnock and I, in our various ways, all came to think out alternatives to the brash, unreal style of philosophising – based essentially on logical positivism – that was current at the time.⁵

Another female philosopher, not based in Oxford, should be added to those who challenged male philosophical hegemony and had an important influence on Murdoch: Simone Weil. She stressed the vital role of perception and attention in apprehending values. She fought in the Spanish Civil War and was part of the French Resistance, dying in 1943 in England. Murdoch was fascinated by Weil's reflections on politics and culture, as well as her philosophical journey from Platonism to a mystical form of Christianity. She called Weil's *The Need for Roots* "one of the very few profound and original political treatises of our time."⁶

After the war, many Oxford philosophers had an ambivalent, sometimes hostile view of Continental philosophers (Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir). Murdoch did not share this aversion. She met Sartre in 1945. Her first book was *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, published in 1953. The book begins with addressing Sartre's novels, perhaps providing a clue that Murdoch herself would later turn to writing novels, for their potential literary and philosophical power. While Murdoch praises Sartre as a playwright, she is highly critical of his philosophy of freedom and values.

⁵ Midgley, "The Golden Age of Female Philosophy."

⁶ Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 16.

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She describes his “obsessive and hypnotic world picture” (Murdoch, 1987: 10) as consisting of a dialectic between freedom (free consciousness) and the given world of other people, history, and traditions. The “en-soi,” that which is unfree, must be overcome heroically by the individual alone. Sartre’s phrase “hell is other people,” from his play *No Exit*, led Murdoch to conclude: “There is no suggestion in Sartre’s account that love is connected with action and day to day living; that it is other than a battle between two hypnotists in a closed room” (1987: 130–131). Her positive views of Sartre are rarely without qualification. “What Sartre certainly has given is a brilliant and generally instructive self-analysis. We are tempted to say to him: this is one kind of person, yes: but there are others” (1987: 127). Still, Murdoch presented Sartre as a philosopher who deserves serious attention. “His philosophy is not just a piece of irresponsible romanticism; it is the expression of a last-ditch attachment to the value of the individual expressed in philosophical terms” (1987: 136–137).

Murdoch’s best-known philosophical work is *The Sovereignty of Good*, 1970, consisting of three essays published earlier. Two other essential works are Murdoch’s *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 1992, and the collection of her essays in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, 1997. She published *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* in 1977 and *Two Platonic Dialogues* in 1996.⁷ Her appreciation of Plato is pervasive.

In 1968 she described herself as “a kind of Platonist.”⁸ In a 1978 interview, she said, “Plato is not only the father of our philosophy, he is our best philosopher” (1997: 6). In the spirit of Plato, Murdoch defended the importance of consciousness; she recognized the positive, magnetic role of goodness, rejecting the idea that goodness is just a subjective expression of individual will and desire. She asserted that the ethical reflection of her day should be replaced with a concern for love and the transforming power of beauty and good art. In her view, Plato “was concerned throughout with how people can change their lives so as to become good. The best, though not the only method for this change, is *dialectic*, that is, philosophy regarded as a spiritual discipline” (1997: 404).

Her novels won the Booker Prize, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, and the Whitbread Literary Award, among others. Her novels have been translated into at least twenty-six languages. She was awarded honorary degrees from Cambridge University, the University of Bath, Durham

⁷ These two works are reprinted in *Existentialists and Mystics*.

⁸ Rose, “Iris Murdoch,” 59–73.

University, Kingston University, and others. Queen Elizabeth II named her a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1987 for her services to literature, hence earning the title Dame Iris Murdoch.

In 1956 Murdoch married John Bayley, an Oxford professor, writer, and literary critic. They had no children. Their marriage, many of Murdoch's relationships, and details of her life and thought are artfully portrayed in Peter J. Conradi's excellent biography *Iris Murdoch: A Life*.

In 1997 Murdoch was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. In 1999 she died in Oxford. Bayley wrote *Iris: A Memoir* in 1998 and *Iris and Her Friends* in 1999, offering an intimate portrayal of caring for Murdoch near the end of her life. A film called *Iris* was made in 2001.

In tribute to Murdoch's love of painting, the background of her portrait in the National Portrait Gallery, London, features a sixteenth-century painting by Titian. Murdoch deemed *The Flaying of Marsyas* to be one of the greatest paintings on the human condition.

1.2 Murdoch Contra Mundum

The two oldest universities in Britain are Oxford University, founded in 1096, and Cambridge University, in 1209. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, other British universities (at St. Andrews, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and London, among others) were centers of important philosophical activity, but immediately following World War II, Oxford and Cambridge had some preeminence. The philosophical climate was not entirely homogenous, but there was a tangible opposition in Oxford and Cambridge to an earlier philosophical movement known as British idealism.

British idealism, a movement from the 1870s to the early 1930s, gave primacy to mind or the mental in its understanding of ultimate reality. One of its founders, Thomas Hill Green, argued that we are part of an absolute mind suffused with goodness, truth, and beauty. Francis Herbert Bradley upheld the ultimate reality of what he called "The Absolute." He said, "The Absolute is actually good, and throughout the world of goodness it is truly realized in different degrees of satisfaction. Since in ultimate Reality all existence and all thought and feeling, becomes one, we may say that every feature in the universe is thus absolutely good."⁹ The grim reality of World War I and the rising tide of modern science, especially Darwinian evolution, undermined the appeal of British idealism.

⁹ Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, 365.