

Iris Murdoch, or What It Means To Be A Serious Philosopher

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*I've tried to be a serious man, you know?
Tried to do right, be a member of the community [...]*¹

Introduction

The last few years have seen a growing interest in the philosophical work of Iris Murdoch. Where the interest in her literary work started early in her career, with the first monograph published in 1965, the first monograph on her philosophical work did not appear until 1996. It is now clear that this first work was not a one-off, but the start of a new area of research.²

What is more, especially the most recent publications note this growing interest, and express joy in the fact that Murdoch is finally being taken seriously. Thus, Justin Brookes writes in his extensive introduction to a recent collection of essays, *Iris Murdoch: Philosopher* (2012):

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1 Larry Gopnik in the film *A Serious Man* (Ethan & Joel Coen, 2009).

2 The first monograph on Murdoch's philosophical work was published in 1996: P. O'Connell. *To Love the Good: The Moral Philosophy of Iris Murdoch*. (Peter Lang). The first monograph on all of Murdoch's philosophical work is M. Antonaccio (2000). *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch*. (Oxford University Press). Since this publication, there has been a steady grow, with more recently M. Antonaccio (2012). *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch*. (Oxford University Press), J. Brookes (ed.) (2012). *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*. (Oxford University Press), and S. Lovibond (2011) *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy* (Routledge).

There are people who suspect now, I think, that Murdoch was either not quite a serious and substantial philosopher or not quite a professional, recognized by her fellows.³

Broakes does not mention who these «people» are, who think that Murdoch was neither «serious nor substantial». It is significant that these people are not identified, and yet I could name at least one, and possibly two. The first would be A.N. Wilson, who in his 2003 biography *Iris Murdoch As I Knew Her* is rather dismissive of Murdoch's philosophical writing. For Wilson, Murdoch's «philosophy» (in quotation marks) is not «philosophy at all». Wilson is keen to *rank* Murdoch as philosopher, and claims that she was not as «substantial as Elizabeth Anscombe», and «obviously» did not «advance [...] or change [...] the nature of philosophical discourse», as Bertrand Russell or A.J. Ayer did. Wilson is also magnanimous, when he reassures that there «is nothing surprising or discreditable about this fact».⁴

A second person who did not take Murdoch's work seriously would be Iris Murdoch herself. A collection of recently published letters has made clear that she did not think herself as good a philosopher as her contemporary and close friend Philippa Foot.⁵ What is more, one finds Murdoch constantly doubting her thoughts in her own work. This is true for both her philosophical writings and her novels. Near the end of «On 'God' and 'Good'» (1969), for instance, an objector enters the text: «[...] at this point someone might say, all this is very well, the only difficulty is that none of it is true [...]». This «someone» continues with detailed criticism, to which Murdoch replies: «I am often more than half persuaded to think in these terms myself». At the end of the same essay, she even admits: «I am not sure how far my positive suggestions make sense».⁶ Thus, Murdoch's texts often read as conversations, as philosophical dialogues with no definitive conclusion.⁷ Yet, where the philosophy is doubting, Murdoch's novels can be understood to challenge or even ridicule. I shall discuss some at some length later. First, I turn to another consideration of «seriousness».

The notion of serious has also cropped up in a controversy regarding a recent interpretation of Murdoch's work. Sabina Lovibond's *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy* (2011) has been subjected to severe criticism by its first two reviews.⁸ Lovibond is accused of bad scholarship and poor argument. (The latter is, as Linda Martín Alcoff has pointed out, the

3 The quotation continues: «Of the seriousness and substance of her work, the remainder of this volume, will I hope be sufficient confirmation; of her professionalism and recognition, her public career in the 1950s could hardly give more evidence». (Broakes, *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, p. 6.)

4 Wilson, *Iris Murdoch as I Knew Her*, p. 28, 85, and 153-154 respectively. Cp. Altorf, «After Cursing the Library», p. 391. In this article I argue that his assessment seems based on limited evidence, i.e. only one of the essays from *The Sovereignty of Good* and a secondary source on *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.

5 See Anne Chisholm, «Iris Murdoch and an Enduring Love Affair», *The Guardian* 6 September 2012. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/sep/06/iris-murdoch-enduring-love-affair>).

6 Murdoch, «On 'God' and 'Good'», pp. 70, 74. This essay is later published in the collection *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970). I shall be referring to the Routledge reprint of this work from 2001 for the following three articles: «The Idea of Perfection», «On 'God' and 'Good'», and «The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts». All other articles by Murdoch are taken from the 1997 collection *Existentialists and Mystics*.

7 See D. Tracy, «Iris Murdoch and the Many Faces of Platonism», esp. p. 66ff.

8 These reviews were written by David Robjant in *The Heythrop Journal* («Is iris Murdoch an Unconscious Misogynist? Some trouble with Sabine Lovibond, the Mother in Law, and Gender», November 2011), and John Kekes in *Philosophy* (July 2012). Full bibliographical information at the end.

worst accusation in philosophy.)⁹ John Kekes accuses Lovibond of making an «elementary mistake». He calls one of her suppositions «simply nonsense» and her approach «poisonous». He provides outrageous comparisons, but the most devastating criticism is left for the end: «Babble», «ideological», «grim», «political» and most of all «radical leftist politics dished out in French flavours».¹⁰ This dish is clearly not to his taste.

David Robjant's article is considerably longer than Kekes' review, and presents a more detailed engagement with the book. Yet, here too, Lovibond is accused of «a wildly inaccurate treatment of Murdoch's philosophical texts»; a critical evaluation is put aside as a «complaint» that has «no justice»; and Lovibond is even accused of speaking «the sort of ill one can only speak of the dead».¹¹ Robjant sums up:

Murdoch is revealed by these failures to be *not a serious scholar*, and Lovibond's sequel is that it is not worth discussing Murdoch in a spirit of serious scholarship. This seems to encapsulate Lovibond's attitude on all the points reviewed.¹²

This controversy, as well as Broakes's assurances, has suggested the central question for this paper: what does it mean to take a philosopher seriously – or more specifically, what does it mean to take Murdoch seriously? In the first section, I argue that there is no obvious answer to this question. This section includes a discussion of Murdoch's famous example of a mother-in-law M and her daughter-in-law D from «The Idea of Perfection» (1964). The next section introduces a scene from Murdoch's novel *The Time of the Angels* (1966) to show that Murdoch had difficulty taking her thoughts seriously at the time of writing the three essays that make up her famous *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970). This difficulty introduces in the last section a return to Lovibond and the controversy mentioned above. I shall argue that the question of taking seriously is closely linked to the practice of philosophy.

What does it mean to take a philosopher seriously?

A common way to characterise a serious philosopher is to list their credentials: date of birth, academic career, works, teachers, students, influence. If I were to follow this approach, I would first recount that Iris Murdoch was born in 1919 and died in 1999. I would mention her education and academic career, her 26 novels as well as her works of philosophy.

9 Alcott writes in her «Is the Feminist Critique of Reason Rational?» (1994): «After Annette Baier's groundbreaking presidential address to the American Philosophical Association in 1990 –groundbreaking in that it was the first address which developed feminist themes– the (male) philosophers that surrounded me in the audience were universally cold in their assessment, one of them expressing the general reaction: 'Nice paper, but no argument.' This, as we all know, is the most devastating criticism a philosopher can make of another». (p. 2).

10 Kekes, [review of *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*], p. 453, 454, 455, 456 (resp.). The final quote runs as follows: «This book is an unlovely combination of psychoanalytic babble about the sado-masochism of women; radical leftist politics dished out in French flavors; numerous quotations from like-minded ideologues as if citing them would constitute reasons for believing what they claim; a grim determination to evaluate the significance of art, literature, philosophy, education, marriage, love affairs, promiscuity and celibacy from a political point of view; and a perfervid ideological commitment to unmask all disagreements with it as symptoms of immorality».

11 Robjant, «Is Iris Murdoch an Unconscious Misogynist?», p. 1022, 1023, and 1024 respectively.

12 Robjant, «Is Iris Murdoch an Unconscious Misogynist?», p. 1028. Emphasis in original.

I might have mentioned her other work: an opera libretto, some poetry. To complete the picture, I would have to add something about the last years of her life, when she suffered from Alzheimer and was cared for by her husband John Bayley.¹³

Yet, it is not certain that such an introduction would convincingly portray Murdoch as a serious philosopher, for if anything her career can be characterised by a tendency to defy common distinctions.¹⁴ Murdoch was both a novelist and a philosopher. Or, perhaps it is more accurate to say that she was a novelist who wrote philosophical work, and a philosopher who wrote novels; or even that she was a philosophical novelist, and a novelistic philosopher. Murdoch was trained in the analytical tradition of philosophy, and yet wrote her first book on a philosopher from the continent, Jean-Paul Sartre. She started her career in Oxford and Cambridge and yet published her best known philosophical books after she had retired from her academic position.¹⁵ Murdoch seemed to have lived a life of the mind and yet at the beginning of this millennium, she was for a period better known for her sexual life and for losing her mind.

Moreover, Murdoch does not take this common approach in either of her books concerned with a single thinker. *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953), her first book, and first work of philosophy, starts with the image of Antoine Roquentin, found in Sartre's philosophical novel *La Nausée*. After only one introductory paragraph the reader is taken to the seashore, where Roquentin stares in disgust at a stone he was about to throw.¹⁶ The book clearly starts with Murdoch's fascination, her interest in this image of Antoine Roquentin. Her work on Plato, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (1976) starts as follows: «To begin with, of course, Plato did not banish all the artists or always suggest banishing any».¹⁷ Again, Murdoch's text is led by an idea, an insight.

Murdoch defies common introductions too because, from her earliest philosophical writing, she often positions herself outside the philosophical discourse. Thus, she writes in «Thinking and Language» (1951): «I set aside all philosophical thinking, old and new», and «I shall assume, as we all do when we are not philosophising [...]».¹⁸ This outside position is often closely related to literature.¹⁹

When thus attempting to introduce Murdoch it becomes apparent that Murdoch's writing itself can be understood as a reflection on seriousness and on taking seriously. In «The Idea of Perfection» (1964) Murdoch sharply criticises «current moral philosophy» for ignoring certain facts and for

impos[ing] a single theory which admits of no communication with or escape into rival theories [...] Instances of the facts, as I shall boldly call them, which interest me and which seem to have been forgotten or «theorized away» are the fact that an unexamined life can be virtuous and the fact that love is a central concept in morals.²⁰

13 Bayley has written three books about the last years and his consequent widowerhood. The first of these has been made into a film, *Iris* (2001).

14 Cp. Willemsen, «We are simply here».

15 *The Sovereignty of Good* in 1970, *The Fire and the Sun* in 1977, and *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* in 1992.

16 Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, p. 39.

17 Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 386.

18 Murdoch, «Thinking and Language», p. 33.

19 See Altorf, «After Cursing the Library».

20 Murdoch, «The Idea of Perfection», pp. 1-2.

What interests me most here is, first, the observation that a theory can be so intolerant of facts and rival understandings of the world, that it does not even allow them being expressed, and, secondly, the interest in the unexamined life. This is of course an immediate reference to the often quoted statement from Plato's *Apology* 38a.

The excluding nature of the existing theory of contemporary moral philosophy hinders Murdoch throughout the essay. Even though she admits that the image of the moral agent in the contemporary moral philosophy is «very powerful», she also finds it «alien and implausible».²¹ Murdoch objects in particular to its disregard for personal musings. She wants to argue that ethics should not limit itself to those moments in which moral decisions are being taken, but also take interest in moral considerations which take place entirely in someone's mind. As Lovibond puts it:

The conclusion to be drawn is that some of our most valuable moral accomplishments leave no trace in the public realm, and that an ethical theory which does not know how to interest itself in anything outside that realm will fail to honour such accomplishments, to its own great loss.²²

A considerable part of «The Idea of Perfection» is taken up by refuting the underlying argument of the prominent position.²³ This refutation turns out to be exasperatingly difficult. As Murdoch puts it: «it turns out to be *logically* impossible to take up an idle contemplative attitude to the good», and «it is not at all easy to mount an attack upon this heavily fortified position».²⁴ The argument necessitates Murdoch to introduce the famous example of a mother-in-law M and her daughter-in-law D.

This example runs as follows. A mother M is unhappy with her son's choice of a bride. Her daughter-in-law D is «quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement». The mother's dislike is considerable. It does not just concern D's behaviour, but includes even her accent and her sense of dress. Yet, M does not show her aversion, but instead she «is a very 'correct' person, [and] behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way». Time passes, and for one reason or another (immigration or death) D has disappeared from M's life. Yet, M does not sit down to nurture her grudge. Instead, she comes round to consider D again, and to find that D is «not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on».²⁵

This example has become very important in studies on Murdoch²⁶. It has been used as emblematic for central ideas of Murdoch's philosophy, such as for instance the significance

21 Murdoch, «The Idea of Perfection», pp. 8-9.

22 Lovibond, *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*, p. 24.

23 The argument is first mentioned on pp. 9-10.

24 Murdoch, «The Idea of Perfection», pp. 15 & 16 respectively.

25 Murdoch, «The Idea of Perfection», pp. 16-17.

26 See for instance Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human*, pp. 87-95, and again *A Philosophy to Live By*, Widdows, *The Moral Philosophy of Iris Murdoch*, pp. 38-39, Laverty, *Iris Murdoch's Ethics* (2007), pp. 99-103, Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, pp. 57-65, as well as various articles in Broakes, *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*. In most of these works it even has its own entry in the index.

of the notion of attention, which Murdoch adopts after reading the work of Simone Weil. Indeed, the word «attention» is italicised by Murdoch: «M of the example is capable of giving careful and just *attention*[...]».²⁷ The example also characterises Murdoch's philosophical style, which often proceeds by means of pictures and imagery.

The example also challenges assumptions about taking seriously. It does so in different ways. For one, M does not think her daughter in law serious, but «a silly vulgar girl». Moreover, when M does not think D serious, she does not take her seriously, i.e. she does not regard her worthy of attention. Her mind is made up. In other words, there seems to be a relation between the perceived seriousness of D and the attention given.

It is clear that the example is phrased in the idiom of a particular part of the English middle class: «not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement»; M is a very «correct» person, etc.²⁸ Most notable of all is the initial conclusion of M's musings: «her son has married beneath him».²⁹ Seriousness here is closely related to expectations. A sense of dress, a certain level of sophistication and a particular accent make one appear serious and ensure that one is taken seriously.

Against this form of seriousness, Murdoch places M's change of heart. Without any observable cause («the M of this example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her») and without the «object of attention» present, the mother-in-law M nevertheless starts rethinking her initial perception of D. Then, she realises that her daughter-in-law who appeared silly, should be taken more seriously.

Significantly, the relation between M & D in a way mirrors that of Murdoch and the dominant theory. In «The Idea of Perfection» Murdoch attempts to draw the attention of the philosophical conversation to «facts» that have been ignored, but time and again she finds herself unable to make her point. Consider in particular the fictional rebuttal of the «existentialist-behaviourist» position that Murdoch tries to challenge in this essay:

the defender of what I have called the existentialist-behaviourist view may argue as follows: [...] M may imagine saying things to D, may verbally describe D in her mind, may brood on visual images of D. But what do these going-ons mean? What is to count here as serious judgment as opposed to «the charmed and habitual rehearsals of phrases?» [...] She can only be thought of as «speaking» seriously, and not parrot-like, if the outer context logically permits.³⁰

The defender is clear: inner musings cannot be taken seriously unless –as Murdoch puts it– «the outer context logically permits», that is unless they are in some way part of the world shared by others. The criticism is disheartening, for only a few paragraphs later Murdoch exclaims: «This is one of those exasperating moments in philosophy when one seems to be relentlessly prevented from saying something which one is irresistibly impelled to say».³¹

27 Murdoch, «The Idea of Perfection», p. 17.

28 Cp. Lovibond, *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*, p. 25

29 Murdoch, «The Idea of Perfection», p. 17.

30 Murdoch, «The Idea of Perfection», p. 19-20.

31 Murdoch, «The Idea of Perfection», p. 21.

Being taken seriously is thus related to existing practices. That should not come as a surprise. Yet, in philosophical discussions it is all too often assumed that philosophy does not come with expectations about how it is done. Philosophical discourse is so radically concerned with truth, that it is considered to be by definition a universal undertaking. That this assumption is mistaken has been experienced and pointed out by women who find that philosophical text can both appeal to their intellect as philosophers and deny them their intellect as women. We may think that for Kant the motto of the Enlightenment, «*Sapere aude*. 'Have the courage to use your own reason!」 applies equally to everyone, only to be told a few lines later that «the step to competence is held to be very dangerous by the far greater portion of mankind (and by the entire fair sex)».³²

Yet, the conflict is not always that explicitly phrased in gender terms. New arrivals to philosophy can also set themselves apart by wondering about imagery (which they should have ignored), or concerning themselves with questions no one else asks.³³ Murdoch was reluctant to consider the issue of gender in philosophy, and yet her work suggests an implicit struggle with some of its practice. This becomes even more clear when considering her novels from the same period.³⁴

A Dinner Conversation

My argument starts with one novel, and more specifically one scene. This scene may not be as spectacular as standing on the beach in despair, yet it is significant in what it includes and in what it leaves out. The novel is *The Time of the Angels* (1966), Murdoch's 10th novel, published 12 years after her first, *Under the Net* (1954). The expression «time of the angels» refers for Murdoch to a period of religious uncertainty. There are still angels, but it is unclear whose messages they bring. One of the novel's characters, Carel, a priest without a parish, uses the expression once, when he tells his brother that there is no God, that the death of God has set the angels free, and that «we are creatures of accident, operated by forces we do not understand». He adds: «We are the prey of the angels», and «Those with whom the angels communicate are lost».³⁵

Murdoch's novels have been characterised by Richard Todd as pressure cookers.³⁶ In a relatively short period of time the characters experience a turmoil of events and emotions. This change is often brought about by the return of a magical figure, an enchanter, or because characters move to a new place, with new ideals for a new life. Whatever the cause, all certainties of their usually quiet lives are suddenly challenged. Stable relationships are broken,

32 Kant, «What is Enlightenment?», p. 85. See also Tuana, *Women and the History of Philosophy*, especially chapter one.

33 On the use of imagery in philosophical texts, see Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, esp. the preface.

34 My argument assumes a relationship between the philosophical and literary work, and Murdoch, most famously in the interview with Magee, has argued against this relationship. However, as I have argued elsewhere and as is evidenced in the practice of the majority of Murdoch commentators, there are good reasons to disregard Murdoch's argument. I will not repeat the arguments here. See Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, pp. 2-6.

35 Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, pp. 185-186. The expression is also used in *The Philosopher's Pupil*. (See Spear, *Iris Murdoch*, p. 57.

36 Todd, «Iris Murdoch: veertig jaar romanschrijven».

and misunderstandings abound. The new life rarely proves to be as originally pictured. At the end of the novel no character is left unchanged. Some may experience redemption, for others this is less obvious. Almost always someone dies. The characters also present a natural relation to philosophy. *The Time of the Angels* even features a strange juxtaposition of chapters: one chapter opens with a philosophical text written by one of the characters, and another starts with an excerpt from Heidegger's *Being and Time*.³⁷

The scene on which I focus, features three characters, all typical for a Murdoch novel: there is an Anglican bishop, who is not given a name; there is the host, who is a very sensible lady called Norah Shadox-Brown, an early retired head of school; the third person is Marcus Fisher, another head of a school –now on sabbatical. Marcus is the brother of the Carel Fisher. Carel appears only sporadically and is in some ways the central enigma of the book, and certainly of this scene.

Carel is the rector of a church that was destroyed in the war and no longer exists. He lives in a vicarage, with his daughter, his ward and a servant. A Russian porter lives with his son in the basement. Their house is, as it were, in the middle of the desert, as it is the only place left standing after a bomb destroyed all else. It is, moreover, constantly enclosed by a thick fog. Indeed, the weather contributes significantly to the isolated atmosphere in this gothic novel. Carel's has been offered this place, when in his earlier parish he started proclaiming the death of God from the pulpit. Marcus is as much fascinated by his brother, as he is by the question of the future of religion. He is writing a book not unlike Murdoch's own *The Sovereignty of Good*.

This group of people can seem unusual to the reader, but they are not unlike other occupants of Murdoch's novels. Her novels feature mostly the English upper middle class: artists, civil servants and school teachers. Most of the men and a few of the women have a degree from Oxford. Bishops and priests also feature regularly, though they often question their calling. Murdoch's priests are often doubting Eckhardt readers, mystical minds, who are nevertheless called upon to provide spiritual advice and moral stability. In the margin are the refugees and immigrants.

The three –the bishop, Norah and Marcus– have had dinner. We enter the scene when the treacle tart is served and leave with the coffee. In between the bishop has had some of the excellent cheese, and the future of religion and morality has been discussed. The author constantly switches between food and faith.

The starting-point for this conversation is Marcus's visit to his brother Carel. Norah tries to impress on the bishop that something needs to be done. Her language lacks ambiguity, or as she puts it: «A spade must be called a spade».³⁸ She thinks Carel «both mad and wicked» and argues that the church has to change this situation. She cannot tolerate a priest who does not believe in God.

The bishop is less plain spoken.³⁹ Where Marcus and the bishop agree that whatever Carel believes he believes with passion, Norah is not so easily satisfied. «What about Jesus

37 Chapters 12 and 15 respectively.

38 Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, p. 99.

39 The reader is not left in doubt about that: «'Belief is such a personal matter, especially in these days,' said the Bishop vaguely». Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, p. 100.

Christ», she wants to know.⁴⁰ One would think this query well suited for a bishop, but her guest frowns and avoids it. Norah, of course, notices immediately, but is not too fussed. «You haven't exactly answered my question» she remarks, «but never mind. I think if you're going to ditch Jesus you ought to say so in plain terms. The religion *is* the myth». Even when the bishop continues and suggests –though more vaguely than I put it here– that the notion of Jesus as a person can and should be dispensed with, Norah simply expresses her dislike for the underlying argument and in the same breath offers coffee.⁴¹

The bishop is in fact quite lax where the teachings of the church are concerned. This upsets Marcus. He does not see himself as religious, but at the same time prefers others to continue to believe in «the redeeming blood of Jesus ... in the Father and the Son, and the Holy Ghost». ⁴² He is upset and frightened, and when the room starts spinning, he tries to grasp on:

«But suppose», he said to the Bishop, «suppose the truth about human life were just something terrible, something appalling which one would be destroyed by contemplating? You've taken away all the guarantees».

The Bishop laughed. «That's where faith comes in».

«The supposition is meaningless», said Norah, «Here, take your coffee». ⁴³

And here, with that coffee, ends the chapter.

This dinner conversation introduces the most pressing philosophical question for Iris Murdoch. Having lived through the Second World War, in and through which she lost people close to her and worked with refugees as an officer with UNRRA (the United Nations Relief And Rehabilitation Administration), Murdoch was, as Peter Conradi phrases it, «hurt into philosophy», where she originally set out to become an art historian.⁴⁴

It turned out to be difficult to express this «hurt» in the tradition of analytical philosophy prominent in Oxford. It was not just that it was not interested in inner musings, but also that ethics took second place after language, epistemology and metaphysics. Murdoch, in contrast, was not just keen to explore ethical questions, she also did not consider ethics as one branch of philosophy, next to metaphysics, epistemology, and logic. In fact, she does not think it is possible to do philosophy neutrally. «To do philosophy», she famously wrote at the beginning of 1967 essay «On 'God' and 'Good'», «is to explore one's own temperament and yet at the same time to attempt to discover the truth». ⁴⁵ In her her 1969 essay «The Sovereignty of God» she proclaims:

[...] since an ethical system cannot but commend an ideal, it should commend a worthy ideal. Ethics should not be merely an analysis of ordinary mediocre conduct, it should be a hypothesis about good conduct and about how this can be achieved.

40 Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, p. 101.

41 Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, p. 102.

42 Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, p. 103.

43 Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, p. 103.

44 Conradi, «Preface» to *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. xix.

45 Murdoch, «On 'God' and 'Good'», p. 45.

How can we make ourselves morally better? is a question moral philosophers should attempt to answer.⁴⁶

The pressing question for Murdoch is then: «How can we make ourselves morally better?». What is more –and here her position becomes even more unusual– for her this question of ethics is closely related to the waning influence of religion. She will try to answer this question in terms of attention, love and imagination. She also desires to answer it in a way that includes the more unlikely inhabitants of any philosophical discourse: virtuous peasants, mothers of large families, and, her favourite, aunts.⁴⁷

The aunts are to be included in philosophy, and the «fact that an unexamined life can be virtuous» should not be «forgotten or ‘theorized away’».⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Murdoch’s principal concern is still with the the more intellectual seekers –«those who are not religious believers».⁴⁹ Marcus exemplifies the people Murdoch is writing for. These people no longer believe in God and seem not that much bothered by that, as long as there is some alternative. This is why Marcus is writing his book and why others constantly remind him what he needs to put into it.

Let’s return once more to the dinner. These people may be eating cake, but their world is nothing like the quiet world of Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind*.⁵⁰ Much is at stake: the life and sanity of a man and of his family, his daughter, niece, and servant who live with him in this strange desert that was left after the destruction of the Second World War. The issue of the future of religion and of morality also concerns the three dinner guests, even though only one seems genuinely upset. It concerns, moreover, the readers. And yet, this discussion is not overly heavy. The excerpt also introduces Murdoch’s great sense of slapstick, where the matter-of-fact Norah can mention proper moral behaviour in the same breath as coffee and cake.

In his biography of Murdoch Peter Conradi writes that around the time of writing *The Time of the Angels* Murdoch is disappointed with her own work.⁵¹ To me this disappointment shines through in the at times lighthearted treatment of difficult philosophical issues, and even of death, as well as in her dealings with the various characters who writes books not unlike herself. Marcus is not allowed to finish his book, but this authorial prohibition is mild in comparison to the destruction brought on Rupert Foster in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. Marcus is initially optimistic to finish his book. He has «plenty of material, it was simply a matter of putting it in order». In the end, he is still working on it, although «it is all different now». (We are not told in what way.)⁵² Rupert is given a much harsher treatment. His book is ripped to parts by his son, his marriage is ended by his attempts to live by his philosophy, and even his life is lost in the end.

46 Murdoch, «The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts», p. 76. Cp. «On ‘God’ and ‘Good’», p. 51: «What is a good man like? How can we make ourselves morally better? Can we make ourselves morally better?».

47 Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, p. 429.

48 Murdoch, «The Idea of Perfection», p. 2.

49 Murdoch, «On ‘God’ and ‘Good’», p. 54.

50 Murdoch mocks Ryle’s world as one where ‘people play cricket, cook cakes, make simple decisions, remember their childhood and go to the circus’. Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, pp. 78-79.

51 Conradi, *Iris Murdoch*, p. 501.

52 Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, pp. 77 & 241. Cp. p. 210.

The future of religion and morality discussed over cheese and coffee. If Murdoch's philosophical position is closest to that of Marcus, then the novel certainly seems undermining. Yet, it is not just the authorial attitude that make this clear. Norah's rich cakes ridicule Marcus's musings and suggest that they divert from the real issue –the priest and even more importantly his daughters. Nora is in some ways a minor character in this novel, who often remains unobserved, and yet it is to this character that Lovibond draws our attention.⁵³ It is indeed Norah who poses the most fundamental challenge to Murdoch's seriousness.

Seriousness and Gender

In his introduction, Broakes emphasises how well respected Murdoch was by her contemporaries.⁵⁴ Her CV may be unusual, yet there is no reason to think her not a serious philosopher. This verdict in one way exemplifies a phenomenal changes in women's lives. Murdoch entered Oxford when women were still «on probation», and yet she was able to claim that gender did not matter in her philosophical career.⁵⁵

Yet, this picture seems incomplete. When considering Murdoch's writings doubts arise. Murdoch's actual opponents may have engaged her in debate, but the fictional opponents are waiting for a reason to take her seriously. Moreover, Murdoch repeatedly places herself outside philosophy. The novels can be understood to raise further concerns, in particular when considering the female characters.

In an interview in 1987 Barbara Heusel asked Murdoch what may seem an obvious question to many of her readers: why are there no strong women intellectuals in her novels? Murdoch replied:

If you portray an intellectual women, part of her role in the book is to be an intellectual woman, but an intellectual man can be just a man. The same question arises for black writers. People expect black writers to write about blacks and black problems [...] I think this is very unfair.⁵⁶

At first sight, this seems a reasonable response. Artists' backgrounds should not force them to write about particular topics. However, on reflection it becomes clear that an important, underlying issue is left unexamined. There is no answer to the question what it is that makes that a woman intellectual stand out. Why can't she be just a woman, just as the male intellectual «can be just a man»? How is that Murdoch claims not to experience any difference in Oxford because she is a woman, and yet finds herself unable to portray such an intellectual woman?

53 Hilda Spear, for instance, does not mention her at all. (*Iris Murdoch*, pp. 55-62)

54 Broakes, «Introduction», pp. 1. 4-5, 6-7.

55 Conradi, *Iris Murdoch*, p. 82, quotes Vera Farnell, the Dean of Somerville: «women are still very much on probation in this University». Almost forty years later, in an Interview with Sheila Hall (1976), Murdoch says: «I have never felt picked out in an intellectual sense because I am a woman; these distinctions are not made at Oxford» (Dooley, *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction*, p. 32). Broakes points out that when Murdoch started out as a lecturer she was paid only half of the salary offered at men's colleges. («Introduction», p. 5.)

56 Dooley, *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction*, p. 208.

Lovibond addresses these questions in *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*. Starting from the dominant image of the «man of ideas» as one with a beard, Lovibond questions to what extent philosophy is still pictured as a male discipline.⁵⁷ In particular, she investigates to what extent the world of learning as pictured by Murdoch in her novels, does or does not allow for the image of the woman philosopher. This is not intended as a punitive exercise:

Rather, I want to see if we can identify any recurring imaginative patterns which are not just those of one artistically gifted individual, but form part of the equipment available to us collectively, in the European tradition, for grasping what a «philosopher» is and who can become one.⁵⁸

Murdoch's work provides an unusual source for investigation here.

Lovibond notes that Murdoch hardly wrote about gender. The most significant comments come from interviews. In these, Murdoch usually expresses her support of what she describes as «women's lib».⁵⁹ And yet, these interviews do not present the full picture. As Lovibond writes: «I was forced to confront in her writing a complex and ambivalent attitude to the goal of sexual equality which was intriguingly at variance with her official –progressive–stance».⁶⁰ Lovibond pursues this insight in order to study something that she thinks is «not merely idiosyncratic but issued from a shared habit of thought».⁶¹ The noted discrepancy between Murdoch's avowed support of women's lib and the limitations of her imagination in her writing are not merely personal to her, but may describe a more general attitude. As Lovibond describes the purpose of her work:

[...] the book as a whole [is] a philosophical essay –an exercise in the kind of ideological self–criticism which is rightly understood as internal to philosophy, since it seeks to correct certain faults which compromise the ability of philosophers to perform their own work.⁶²

In other words, hers is an investigation into a problem that affects philosophical and philosophers' practice. Murdoch's «failure» is significant for the current practice of philosophy, as it is shared by many if not all –though as far as I can see now, Lovibond never explicitly includes herself.

As I noted above, Murdoch does not consider *what* it is that prevents women from becoming ordinary. It would seem that she expects women to become ordinary in due course by simply persisting. Yet, one could of course question whether women should want to become ordinary, but also whether simply persistence suffices. Lovibond, quoting Simone

57 Lovibond, *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*, p. 2.

58 Lovibond, *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*, p. 7. Lovibond refers here to the work of Le Doeuff and her notion of the «philosophical imaginary».

59 «The point of liberation is not, and this is to differ with certain views of women's lib, to say we're better, or we're special, or we're wonderful, but just to be equal, to be *ordinary*, to join the human race, to be people, just people like everybody else». Dooley, *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction*, p. 83.

60 Lovibond, *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*, p. vii.

61 Lovibond, *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*, p. vii.

62 Lovibond, *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*, p. viii.

de Beauvoir, suggests it does not.⁶³ Part of the problem, Lovibond argues, is created by what Michèle Le Doeuff calls the philosophical imaginary, those images in philosophical texts that do not draw any attention and yet present argument unchallenged. Lovibond's example is of a «man of ideas» who can be identified by his «electric blue eyes and a prophet's beard». Lovibond wonders:

[...] if the myth-friendly attribute are worthy of notice [...] shouldn't we spare a thought for those less fortunate in this respect than our sample professor? What about those many gifted scholars whose eyes are of no more than average brightness, and who are unable to grow a decent beard –or any beard at all?⁶⁴

Lovibond explores this issue through a discussion of the influence of Weil on Murdoch's philosophy, and by means of a thorough discussion of the novels. Especially this last discussion provides some sharp observations about the peculiarities of Murdoch's imagination with regard to the gender of her intellectual characters. Lovibond shows convincingly that the intellectual development of Murdoch's characters follows a certain pattern: «The fundamental gender difference seems to be that male education gives rise to issues of promise, fulfilment, vocation and destiny, whereas female education does not, but is enveloped in an atmosphere of vagueness and neglect».⁶⁵ It is this insight, together with Murdoch's ambiguous elevation of the unexamined life that brings back the dinner conversation from the *The Time of the Angels*, especially since it allows a discussion of Norah.⁶⁶

Norah is, of course, not without an education. She is a retired head of school. Yet, there is no suggestion that she studies. Her books are described as mere decoration: «... with all their paper covers still upon them, [they] seemed as neat and clean and colourful as her china».⁶⁷ She is belittled by the other characters. Marcus is contemptuous of her for being «sensible straightforward», and thinks her unable to «understand a complex inward character like Carel». He finds her «brisk sensibleness of an old Fabian radical a bit bleak at times». He constantly assumes she will not understand. Muriel similarly makes fun of Norah, her old teacher.⁶⁸

Yet, it is Norah, who time and again understands the problems and acts appropriately. The author leaves little doubt that Marcus is constantly hindered by his fantasies.⁶⁹ Norah, on the other hand, helps out Muriel, both practically and emotionally.⁷⁰ She provides a pension for

63 This is the quote from *The Second Sex*, in Lovibond, *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*, pp. 15-16: «In general, the superior caste is hostile to the parvenus of the inferior caste: whites will not go to see a black doctor, nor men a women doctor; but individuals from the lower caste, imbued with the feeling of their generic inferiority and often full of resentment of someone who has prevailed over destiny, will also prefer to turn to the masters [...] The woman must ceaselessly earn a confidence not initially granted to her: at the outset she is suspect, she has to prove herself. If she is any good, she will, people say. But worth is not a given essence: it is the result of a favourable development».

64 Lovibond, *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*, p. 1-2.

65 Lovibond, *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*, p. 72.

66 Lovibond does not discuss this novel. See p. 42 for Lovibond on the unexamined life.

67 Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, p. 152.

68 Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, pp. 14, 21, 45-46 respectively. Cp. p. 79.

69 See for instance Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, p. 78.

70 Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, pp. 152, 230.

the porter, Eugene Peshkov, and a study fund for his son Leo. She understands from the very beginning that the situation in the isolated vicarage is detrimental for the two young women. In Norah's warm, comfortable room with plenty of cakes and buttered toast, characters see clarity in their muddled thoughts. Norah appears, indeed, to be the virtuous peasant, who –despite the disappearance of religion– is not «without resources».⁷¹

Norah is also more of a challenge to Marcus's theorising than his brother Carel is. Marcus's visits to Carel divert his writing into new directions, but never obstruct it. Yet, Marcus also realises that Norah's good sense forms a much bigger challenge, which is why he keeps information from her and refuses to stay overnight, or move into the flat above hers. What is more, Norah challenges not just Marcus, but even Murdoch's practice –both her philosophical and literary writing. In Norah's world, there is no need for philosophical musings, as it is perfectly obvious what needs to be done in difficult situations. What is more, with Norah in charge, there would not have been the drama that is the novel.

It is this problem that Lovibond analyses in her work, though she does so in somewhat different terminology.⁷² Lovibond's analysis raises fundamental questions about what it is to do philosophy. Unfortunately, this issue is not recognised by either of the reviewers. Instead, their criticism starts from particular assumptions about philosophy. Kekes begins his review with a few quotes from the Brian Magee interview, in the series «Men of Ideas».⁷³ Kekes explains this starting-point thus: «The reason for citing these passages is to show that Murdoch's philosophical and novelistic aims were not political and quite different from one another.»⁷⁴ In other words, the quotes are taken as gospel to prove that for Murdoch «the primary aim of philosophy is an impersonal search for the truth».⁷⁵ This is actually debatable, because the Magee interview cannot be taken as an indisputable source, as I have argued elsewhere.⁷⁶ Even more important for my argument here, this insight is not a new one. Murdoch is only quoted to confirm an existing assumption about philosophy.

A similar certainty one finds in Robjant's criticism. Robjant often starts his criticism by outlining two possibilities. (Novels are either «realistic» or «absurd».)⁷⁷ Each time Lovibond is found wanting. The first page of his review provides an insightful example. Robjant writes:

[Lovibond] is not investigating Murdoch in the hope of extracting any philosophical insight from her, nor with the thought that one could help to challenge gender stereotypes by celebrating Murdoch's philosophical endeavour as an example to be

71 Murdoch, «On 'God' and 'Good'», p. 72. Norah is thus introduced. She opens chapter two by asking: «What are you going to do about your brother?». She is then described as follows: «Like so many of those whose only troubles are the troubles of others, she had carried her girlish looks well on into middle age». (Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, p. 13)

72 See in particular Lovibond, chapter four.

73 It is unfortunate that Kekes suggests the first quote is from a different resource than the second, whereas this is not the case. Moreover, he does not know the first quote has been taken from an interview at all.

74 Kekes, [review of *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*], p. 453.

75 Kekes, [review of *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*], p. 451. Compare Robjant, «Is Iris Murdoch an Unconscious Misogynist?», p. 1021.

76 See Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, chapter one. One can also question to what extent Kekes' argument fits the opening lines of «On 'God' and 'Good'»: «To do philosophy is to explore one's own temperament and yet at the same time to attempt to discover the truth». (Murdoch, «On 'God' and 'Good'», p. 45).

77 Robjant, «Is Iris Murdoch an Unconscious Misogynist?», p. 1022.

followed. Instead, Lovibond's interest is in the question of what Murdoch's writings can reveal of «the (still problematic) relationship of women to philosophy».

For Robjant, one either investigates or celebrates. Lovibond's decision to do something different lands her only a few lines later the accusation that she considers Murdoch an «unconscious misogynist».⁷⁸

Both reviewers then do not consider Lovibond's central challenge to philosophy. In this context it is significant that neither remarks on the significance of the work of Le Doeuff for Lovibond's undertaking, for Le Doeuff constantly challenges the practice of philosophy, as well as the supposed opposition between philosophy and feminism. Lovibond's achievement is the detailed analysis of Murdoch's inconsistent stance regarding gender. This inconsistency reveals a larger difficulty regarding the position of women in philosophy. It is possible that Murdoch was in some way aware of this problem, even if she did not consider it in such terms, or even acknowledge it. It is also disappointing that at the end of Lovibond's work we are no closer to a more positive understanding of the female philosopher.

Coda

What does it mean to take a philosopher seriously? I find myself once more with Virginia Woolf in the British Museum. Taken back by the «avalanche» of books that has arrived on her desk she writes: «Now the trouble began. The student who has been trained in research in Oxbridge has no doubt some method of shepherding his question past all distractions till it runs into its answer as a sheep runs into its pen». She observes a young man, who is «extracting pure nuggets of the essential ore every ten minutes or so. His little grunts of satisfaction indicated so much».⁷⁹ Woolf, on the other hand, finds that her notes have become indecipherable after a morning's work of collecting the various opinions of men about women. She discovers, moreover, that she has been drawing a picture of an angry professor. This «fact of anger» is the only thing the narrator retains at the end of the morning, and she realises that her anger is a response to his.⁸⁰ It is the one fact that, to me, seems to matter more than all others. It is also one she could not have discovered by following method.

At the start of this paper I queried the use of the notion of seriousness in recent work on Iris Murdoch. What does it mean to take Murdoch seriously as a philosopher? I have talked of Murdoch's diversion from prominent arguments and prominent forms of argument, her inclusion of unusual characters in argument, the posthumous emphasis on her sexual life and loss of mind, and her own insistence to be treated as an «ordinary» author and thinker, who has joined the human race. If Lovibond is right, then there are good reasons to believe that Murdoch was not taken seriously because of a persistent philosophical imaginary (despite –pace Brookes– her academic achievements in the 1950s). It may even be that she

78 Robjant, «Is Iris Murdoch an Unconscious Misogynist?», p. 1021.

79 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 28. Cp. p. 3-4: «I should never be able to fulfil what is, I understand, the first duty of the lecturer - to hand you after an hour's discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece for ever». Of course, the person in the British Museum is not Woolf, but the narrator of her story.

80 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 33.

was unable to take herself seriously, because she was unable to reconcile the virtuous peasant and philosophy.

Yet, Murdoch's central question, «How can we make ourselves morally better?» is as important now as it was for her. It is, moreover, not just for the virtuous peasants to answer. Of course, the dinner conversation has its limitations. The porter in the kitchen is never invited to this discussion. In fact, Murdoch's novels are full of characters who remain outside. Yet, I would think that Murdoch allows and even encourages us to broaden the conversation. To look again, as M did. It is open for everyone to join these three characters for the coffee that is about to be served. In doing so, we continue that conversation about «how to make ourselves morally better?» with all the jokes and all the arguments, with coffee and cake.

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