Human Relationships and Moral Goodness in Iris Murdoch’s Novels

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Among the philosophers and novelists of the last half-century, Iris Murdoch is remarkable for her preoccupation with the conception of morality. In her fictional and philosophical work Murdoch can be regarded as a great supporter of the perspective of the ordinary human being. Her novels show her characters in different lights and in various degrees of moral goodness. In Iris Murdoch's novels human relationships are main link with reality. Whereas her plots or individual episodes reach into fantasy, symbolism or allegory and fit ingenious patterns, she achieves the contingency, which she considers so important for novel writing, by putting her characters at the mercy of real enough pitfalls of human situations of personal involvement. They are orchestrated by the author, but not much differently from the randomness of events in the backdrop of real life throbbing in animation. Iris Murdoch's inventiveness does in no way allow her situations to slip into clichés (an idea that has been used so often that it no longer has much meaning and is no more interesting). The reality is thus very much our human reality – not only with the details of life-styles, attitudes and problems we encounter today, but also with an undercurrent of unanswered questions that stare us in the face, as old as mankind.

Iris Murdoch's commitment to the problems of human relationships had already been shown in her early book on Sartre, where she pointed out Sartre's lack of interest in this aspect of the human situation:

“Sartre by-passes the complexity of the world of ordinary moral virtues .... The novel, the novel proper that is, is about people's treatment of each other, and so it is about human values”.¹

Iris Murdoch's interest in human relationships may best be seen in the light of her moral philosophy. The cited quotation amply illustrates the link she sees between moral philosophy, human relationships and it is not by chance that she elucidates many of them through relationships between people. The concepts of internal struggle as a moral activity, of freedom and of love all share one important pre-requisite, which is
attention -- attention to the surrounding world and particularly attention to other people.

The philosophical thought of Iris Murdoch proposes that no ethical tradition has ever adequately fashioned a picture of human beings as they truly are. In the course of her career this was what she sought to illustrate through her works in philosophy and literature – texturing a personal vision of man’s morality.

William Van O’Connor wrote that like Sartre, Murdoch views man as a:

“Lonely creature in an absurd world … impelled to make moral decisions, the consequences of which are uncertain”. ii

Iris Murdoch’s view is that morality has everything to do with our concerned responsiveness. Iris Murdoch also calls it “Loving attention” – to other particular individuals, where this responsiveness involves an element of particularity not reducible to any form of complex universality.

“In Iris Murdoch’s writing personal relationships are the principal setting in which this moral endeavor takes place. … The moral task is not a matter of finding universalizable reasons or principles of action, but of getting oneself to attend the reality of individual other persons. Such attention requires not allowing one’s own needs, biases and desires regarding the other person to get in the way of appreciating his or her own particular needs and situation.” iii

Because one’s love for the other person is inextricably woven with the importance of that person to one’s own life, seeing the other in herself – distinct and separate from oneself – is, as Iris Murdoch emphasizes, a difficult task, and she is correct to emphasize the domain of personal relations as a moral domain.

Heather Widdows wrote:

“Murdoch’s moral vision could perhaps be expected to take into account her vision of people and the world which comes through her novels and which she enacted in her life. … Her novels, as her philosophy, reveal her perennial preoccupation with goodness and what makes people good and evil, as well as exploring the nature of religion in a secular world.” iv

Iris Murdoch’s wish is that philosophy should once again present picture of the whole of human life and provide succour and insight to all. She believes that:
“In the erosion of religion and the elevation of science, something essentially human has been “lost”; a phrase we will encounter often as we discuss her moral vision.”\textsuperscript{v}

Iris Murdoch started to publish theoretical texts before fictional ones; therefore it is important to begin by giving her account of linguistic analysis and existentialism both of which she was initially attracted to but she rejected later. Her simultaneous rejection of linguistic analysis and existentialism has been shown in her essays like, \textit{The Existentialist Hero} (1950), \textit{The Novelist as, Metaphysician} (1950), \textit{Nostalgia for the Particular} (1952), \textit{Vision and Choice in Morality} (1956), and \textit{Metaphysics and Ethics} (1957), as well as \textit{Sartre: Romantic Realist} (1953).

\textbf{Under the Net} which first introduced Iris Murdoch as a novelist represents an image of the private will, of various private wills, with a moral and philosophical significance. In this novel the net is not seen as something which is at least initially a trap, through which one tries to escape its meshes. It is seen as something thrown over truth, underneath which we must creep in order to get at the precise situation. Iris Murdoch in \textit{Under the Net} shows that she is a realist and an extremely rapid and prolific writer, and in her novel she wants to address the real and important problems making an effort to understand human ideas and situations and the way to tackle them best. This is why Iris Murdoch is not only recognized as a most productive and influential 20\textsuperscript{th} century British novelist, but also a powerful intellectual as well as an original theorist of fiction.

\textit{Under the Net} represents two quests shown by its hero or narrator Jake --for Hugo and for Anna. At the end of the book, Jake, having found both the objects of his search, has found out more about reality and about his own relationship to them. In the end of the novel Jake comes to know much more about his own limitations and his affinity to them. About the novel, A.S.Byatt writes in \textit{Degrees of Freedom}:

\begin{quote}
“The novel could be described as a philosophical novel very precisely since there is clearly a very conscious attempt to pattern. The events in Jake’s story are in terms of ideas of freedom, of philosophical approaches to reality, to what we know and what we can not know.”\textsuperscript{vi}
\end{quote}

In her novel, \textit{Under the Net}, she tries to infuse philosophy with the image constituted by the story. Iris Murdoch observes that a novel should be “an art of image” and not merely to be an instrument of analysis and reflection.
The rejection of Existentialism by Iris Murdoch operates along somewhat different lines from that of objective language. Iris Murdoch proclaims that existentialism provides us with an image of self in the modern world -- a world without God is understood to be contingent. The self becomes the sole arbiter of value, competing against other selves and their values. All have to rely on their selves as sources of meaning as there is no external guarantor of the “correctness” of any particular one. Given this situation, the individual may have two stances:

(a) courage and action, or

(b) despair and inaction.

If he chooses the former he will find himself engaged in constant battle with other selves who also want to assert their value; choosing the latter will leave him only in a state of agony and frustration. Murdoch points out the inadequacies of Existentialist philosophers since they present a shallow view of human nature – “a simplified and impoverished inner life.” Iris Murdoch considers that novels written under the impact of the philosophies lack a genuine conception of love and freedom showing a “pointlessness of life”.

*Under the Net* is a philosophical myth dealing with the question --how do we experience reality, or what is real in our experience? The characters are grouped round this -- Hugo with his simple nostalgia for the particular; Dave with his concern for logical analysis of words and rigid moral philosophy; Lefty with his subjection of everything to political expediency. Mars represents animal vitality; Anna conveys the experience of reality through pure or impure art; Sammy wields money; Sadie’s aim is to use other people. The contrasted worlds of business and art, silence and speech, isolation and society: all of these are patterned, introduced, reflected upon, and used in the story as if a dream allegory would have used them.

Such conditions create tribulations. Therefore the individual will cope with his understanding of the world as contingent, by indulging in the consolation of self deception, as in the case of Jake and Misha Fox. Such self-deception will fulfill their yearning for logical necessity in the order of the world. In Sartre's representation of the world, value - including moral value - is created through a process that starts with reflection followed by choosing an action. It is through his choices that the individual makes, and he also confers meaning on the world around him. *Under the Net* is philosophical fable, using a proliferation of characters and dramatic incident -- either farcical or tragic, to convey the central theme.
In *Under the Net* the theme is concerned with necessity and danger of concepts, forms in thought and action, in the worlds of art, politics, of morals and of love. In *The Flight from the Enchanter* the social theme is involved. The novel refers to the proper and improper use of power, personal and public, playing comic and bitter games, with various forms of enslavement and emancipation, sexual, financial, bureaucratic and military. Murdoch does not agree to the "imaginative solipsism" of Sartre's individual, that she describes as a function of the alienation of the self from the environment, and criticizes Sartre’s inability to see emotion as a creative force, and also his view of the imagination as a tool of self-deception but these two novels are close to Iris Murdoch's work on Sartre, in the sense that they take up lightly but profoundly the Sartrean issue of relationship of the individual, and of the art to political structure and ideals. The central figures of both novels -- Jake and Rosa Keepe, are Sartrean in the sense that they move through a society, unreal and alien without the consolation of a rational universe. The virtue of these figures lies in understanding their own contingency and not in the contingency of the world.

We can say that these novels ask Sartrean questions but do not offer Sartrean answers. Sartre's hero agonizes and contemplates in a lucidly tortured solitude. These first two fantasies of Iris Murdoch are a kind of meaningful games with Sartrean universe. Jake tries an internal monologue but discovers that the world is full of other people whose views, though he has misinterpreted, yet can learn. Rosa fails in observing individual life and the needs of Nina, but they are they are very much there to be observed and Rosa can as well learn. There is no adequacy in any single view of the world in the novel where everyone is always offering epigrammatic views on the nature of society, reality or human suffering.

According to Iris Murdoch philosophy and novel writing is complementary but at the same time finds philosophy very alien. Philosophy, Iris Murdoch believes, as a counter natural activity that goes against the bent of the human mind, whereas art goes with the bent of human mind.
Works Cited


5 The feeling that something has been “lost”, that there is a certain “moral void” -- echoes some of the contemporary worries about a “moral crisis” and a “process of demoralization”. Murdoch, Existentialists and Mystics, 1997, p. 171.