

*Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, ed. Justin Broackes. Oxford University Press, 2012. 385pp.

*Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*, Sabina Lovibond, Routledge, 2011. 152pp.

In the Preface to his fine collection Justin Broackes explains that many of the papers first saw the light of day at a conference at Brown University in 2001. At that time, shortly after her death, public interest in Iris Murdoch was at a peak, fuelled by John Bayley's affectionate memoir, the drama of the fine mind destroyed by Alzheimer's disease, and the subsequent star-studded film. But appreciation of her as a philosopher was limited, and these volumes are part of a movement trying to alter that. Broackes himself contributes an extensive and devout introduction to his collection, detailing many of the themes that occupy the other contributors, and the papers themselves show pleasing signs of having cross-fertilized each other during the long time it took for the collection to come together.

The standard story about Murdoch as a philosopher goes like this. After an initial flirtation with Marxism she discovered existentialism, but soon chafed at its psychological and moral inadequacies. Installed as a Fellow of St. Anne's she also rebelled against ideas of a similar kind prevailing in Oxford philosophy at the time, as did her colleague Elizabeth Anscombe, and a little later her friend Philippa Foot. Oxford, like existentialism, was wedded to a sharp fact-value distinction, with truth confined to value-free facts, and values arbitrarily stamped on these by the fiat of the 'giddy isolated will' or the 'empty self'. Murdoch rightly rejected this picture. Partly through reading the French mystic Simone Weil she came to celebrate instead the involvement of values in the whole life and the whole perceptual world of agents. Hence the association of genuine goodness with the capacity for 'just and loving attention'—an endeavor in which the agent needs to free herself from

obstacles, notably the clammy tentacles of the 'big fat ego', and thereby come to see things truthfully, and lovingly. This clarity of vision, of which the best examples are found in great art, is seamlessly entwined with an appreciation of the value of people and things, or a direct perception of what a situation demands. But such work is never final. There is always more to see and more to understand, and appreciating this brings us to the spiritual idea of the Good: the authoritative, magnetic, ineffable, light-giving focus that energizes the difficult effort to achieve a purified, redeemed, clear, yet affect-laden perception of the world.

This uplifting message is elaborated with undeniable brilliance in Murdoch's surprisingly large body of philosophical work, as well as many of her novels. Neither Sabina Lovibond nor any of the contributors to Justin Brookes's volume directs a wholly deflationary look at it, although their modest reservations, taken together, could build up to a significant doubt about the tone and the significance of this vision of our fallen state, and of the path to its improvement.

The foundation for one such doubt is firmly laid by Richard Moran. Moran points out that in spite of her having written the first English account of Sartre's philosophy, Murdoch's existentialism is a caricature of anything Sartre (or Kierkegaard) actually held, although he generously forgives the caricature as being an accurate picture of what the spirit of the post-war age took from the existentialists. But Sartre was far from subscribing to a straightforward fact-value distinction, as even a cursory look at his extensive work on both imagination and the emotions shows. Concentrating on paralysing emotions like anxiety, fear, or despair, Sartre thought that 'emotion is the self-transformation of man by which he posits a world in which the insuperable difficulties and dangers are made harmless or even annihilated'. In general the world in which we act is not made up of 'facticities', but of stuff perceived as offering us affordances and obstacles. As a result the will is far from the 'empty'

machine for plumping amongst indifferent choices. The will is neither giddy nor empty: it is guided by our values and full of the intentions that arrive with our own perception of our own situation. In other words, exactly as Murdoch herself later stressed, it is not the thin moment of decision that marks the entrance of values into the world. They entered long previously, with the quality of the consciousness directed onto the situation in which the agent finds herself, but which she has also defined for herself. It was after all Sartre who said ‘When I deliberate the die is already cast—the decision has already been taken, by the time the will intervenes’.

Sartre also said that ‘Consciousness does not limit itself to the projection of affective meanings upon the world around it: it lives in the new world it has thereby constituted—lives it directly, commits itself to it...’. However many of the philosophers in the collection loathe and fear this metaphor of projection. They want to say instead that with the right kind of ‘just and loving’ take on the world, real values, real moral facts, spring to the eye: we become receptive to them and the world discloses them to us. Indeed a large part of the editor’s admiration for Murdoch is that she acted as John the Baptist to the later philosopher John McDowell, who elaborated this view in his many stately writings. So when Hamlet finds his world weary, stale, flat and unprofitable we might think he was projecting his own despair or lassitude onto it, but it may be that the uses of the world were actually thus, and this was disclosed to his just and loving attention. My own reaction is that we might just about say this, but we will incline to the verdict only insofar as we find ourselves echoing Hamlet’s woe. The place of our own attitudes or emotions in generating that congruence is left unaddressed, so that as a contribution to the anatomy of moral perception, taking us beyond anything in the existentialists, this is all something of a damp squib.

The truth is that our perceptions, like our language, may be thoroughly infused with evaluations, but our critical intelligence is capable of distilling out the elements in the compound and scrutinizing the associations of values and beliefs that we are making. Of course, we will be standing somewhere, deploying more words and perceptions as we do this, but we need not finish up just where we started. Hamlet can ask himself whether his own mood is colouring his take on Elsinore unduly, and, fearing that it is, he might try to snap out of it.

As Moran points out, the irony is that denying our own subjectivity, and thinking instead that the world just requires whichever verdicts we give, itself sounds suspiciously like the work of the big fat ego. It breathes an air of complacency, or a disinclination to interrogate both ourselves and the background culture which will have moulded our stances towards the world. Supposing that the evaluatively loaded words with which we describe things give us the only true way of describing them disguises our own responsibility and acquiescence in shaping and sustaining the evaluative perspective, and this is precisely the denial of responsibility against which the existentialists fought. It is in effect identifying our own emotions and attitudes as simply reflections of the word of God.

The acceptable element of Murdoch's vision simply lies in the reminder that we often need to beware whether our own concerns are infecting our take on things, to take a second and third look, and to be aware that without an effort to do so our judgments may be less fair or charitable than they should be. But it would be as well to add that there are things in this wicked world that shouldn't be looked at too lovingly. I would not recommend a loving look at, say, the doings of the present Syrian government, or the genocide in Rwanda.

The idea of values being disclosed to the right kind of attention is often fathered onto Aristotle, whose ethics centres on everyday assessments of character, finding people

vulgar or cultivated, rash or courageous, just or vengeful. But famously Murdoch gravitated towards the more metaphysical, religious, language of Plato in which the Good is available only to the elect. She also tends to think that joining the elect is mainly a matter of suppressing selfish desires, whereas for Plato it involves ten years of mathematics and five of philosophy, which suggests a rather different set of qualifications for understanding things properly. Neither story seems adequate. It is not only lack of mathematics, or the intrusion of selfishness, that are enemies of a good response to things. Conventions, cultural stereotyping, lack of practice, simple lack of experience, and even an overdeveloped altruism can all play their role as well, as several writers here point out. There are many ways of going wrong.

Plato also had his adept return to the Cave as leader and guide, whereas Murdoch is more reticent about whether superior moral vision actually leads you to do much, apparently fearing that only 'behaviourists' need to think so (a torpedo that needs firing alongside Moran's could be aimed at her treatment of Gilbert Ryle). Indeed, in her most famous example of an improved moral take on something, she actually specifies that a mother-in-law's increasingly just and loving appreciation of her son's wife brings no change in her behaviour whatsoever. She is apparently not inclined to smile at her more, or more genuinely, to listen more patiently, or to spend more time with her 'however favourable the circumstance'.

If this is Goodness, one might think, it's not much cop. The danger lies in the close comparison with aesthetics. There is not much for spectators to do about great art except to absorb it, whereas there may be a lot to do about your daughter-in-law. But the example also illustrates a rather alarming tendency for Murdoch to draw her good women in especially droopy terms. As Sabina Lovibond laments in a particularly insightful chapter ('What is she

afraid of?') in her excellent, forgiving, but ultimately disappointed discussion of Murdoch and feminism, her heroines 'detach themselves from all good things and wait' radiating only 'beneficent lumpishness', or placid 'thing-in-itselfness', while Murdoch herself clearly displays an 'animus against real-life, articulate feminism'. Few contemporary women will appreciate an ethic of dumb worship, obedience, and subservience in which women are sanctified insofar as they resemble puddings. Clearly the slogan 'ni dieu, ni maître' had little resonance for Murdoch. It is one of the virtues of Lovibond's insightful essay to recognize that Murdoch's own penchant for a world of Hampstead master-thinkers playing games with their humid coteries of adoring disciples is one that we should not want to share.

Murdoch was clearly an enormously intelligent and attractive person. But quite apart from her slanted versions of other philosophers, I am not sure about the overall quality of her just and loving attention to her world. Brookes's authors are suitably high-minded, but a rare light note is given by Martha Nussbaum's anecdote of lunch at Murdoch's grand but notoriously squalid home on the Cotswolds. Only a fatty paté, which 'Murdoch ate absent-mindedly with her fingers', and cherries were on offer, neither of which Nussbaum could stomach. Yet, she affirms, after being subjected to Murdoch's unnerving gaze, 'I had no doubt...that Murdoch could have described me, after an hour, far more precisely than any lover of mine after some years'. I cannot speak for Professor Nussbaum's lovers, but I can't help thinking that if a hostess of mine was unable to tell when I was nauseated by the grisly food on offer, I would not bet the farm on her vast yet hidden powers of observation. Or perhaps Murdoch, undoubtedly neglectful of her guest, was being malicious rather than obtuse. In any event, not much by way of manifesting the Good—but there wasn't a pudding in sight.

